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THUNDER IN THE EARTH

Books by Edwin Lanham

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BANNER AT DAYBREAK
ANOTHER OPHELIA
THE STRICKLANDS
THUNDER IN THE EARTH

THUNDER
IN THE
EARTH

by Edwin Lanham

HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY

A stylized, handwritten-style logo consisting of a large, flowing 'H' and 'B' intertwined, representing the publisher Harcourt, Brace and Company.

NEW YORK

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To
IRENE

THUNDER IN THE EARTH

I

THE great legs of the wooden derrick cast a shadow that way by day, and on this clear night they loomed black against the rising moon. The rig was dark and moonlight was reflected on the still water of the slush pit. He had dug up the earth to form the pit and he had filled it with water and cuttings from deep underground, brought up in the bail. And he had fired the boiler which stood a hundred feet away, canted slightly on one side. But as he leaned in the doorway of the shack on this clear July night Cobb Walters gazed past the derrick and the slush pit and the cold boiler at the shapes of the distant hills, a series of bare knobs that were an ancient shudder of the earth's crust.

Behind Cobb a lamp burned, and its light fell on a row of small white cotton sacks hanging on nails beside the door, at his elbow. Each sack bore a label, and the last of them, placed there two days before, said *4050 feet*. Each sack contained a sample taken at a different level, bits of crushed rock that the drill had pounded, that had been brought to the surface in the bailer, dried on the rig floor and labeled for geologists to study.

The air was soft summer air, and breathing it, Cobb sighed deeply. The moonlight and the dark derrick and the cold boiler had made him sad and he thought that now he must begin again. Another lease. Another rig. Another wildcat well. Another job.

Cobb turned back into the bare room that smelled of grease and sweat and brackish water. The cards were dealt

on the table and John Redbird and his wife were waiting. The Indian wore a black hat without indentation in the high crown and the brim shaped long shadows on his face.

"Cobb, when you go away?" John Redbird asked.

"I guess in the morning," Cobb said, and returned to his chair at the table. He picked up his hand and arranged the seven cards.

Sanderson Lake, the driller who had worked with Cobb for two months past, was stretched out on a bunk, thumbing the pages of a trade journal. The light fell harshly on the slick paper of the magazine and Sandy squinted. He had the over-lean look of a man who had recently lost weight, and he had a sharp nose and thin lips twisted downward at the corners. As he chewed tobacco his teeth were clamped so hard on his cud that the muscles of his jaw stood out. He grunted and said, "Look at this." He turned the journal around and Cobb saw the black headlines of an editorial: *Why Talk Depression in an Industry Nearly Depression-Proof?*

"Depression-proof, they call it," Sandy said. "If it was just dry hole proof, now, it would be something."

"Knock," said Rosie Redbird as she spread her cards on the table. She had three kings and the rest of her hand counted to twenty-two. Cobb threw in his hand and John Redbird made marks on a piece of paper sack.

"Too bad you go away, Cobb," John Redbird said. He grinned, and his two gold teeth shone in the lamplight.

"Well, it has to be," Cobb said. "We went down four thousand and fifty feet, but all we got was a nice water well."

"You don't care, Cobb?"

"Hell, no, except there goes my job, and jobs are hard come by, even in this here depression-proof industry."

Sandy Lake grunted and spat tobacco juice into an empty gallon can.

"We sure miss you, Cobb," Rosie Redbird said, with a nod of her head. The part was a white line in her black hair.

"Well, I hate to go," Cobb said, smiling at the Indian woman. "We've had some good times here. But I got to be on my way. I'm taking out for Texas in the morning. Wichita Falls first, and then maybe out to West Texas, to the Yates field, or over to that new Van field. I don't know. Wherever it looks the best."

"It says here there ain't much field work going on in West Texas," Sandy said, turning on his stomach. "They got them big wells out at Yates prorated and there ain't much drilling, Cobb. And that Van field is a big company proposition. You won't find a job there."

Cobb frowned and drew a card from the pack. As soon as he made his discard John Redbird knocked and won. The Indian made more marks on the brown paper and began shuffling the cards.

"With the market the way it is, with a daily production of damn near a million barrels in the state of Texas alone, it don't look so good," Sandy said. "Cobb, I don't know where you're going to find you a job."

"All right," Cobb said sharply. "All right."

Sandy squinted at Cobb, spat again, and resumed his reading in silence.

On the next hand Rosie Redbird went rummy and Cobb slapped his cards on the table. "Damn it, my luck has run out. It sure has run out." He got to his feet. "I've had enough, John."

John Redbird smiled. "Maybe next hand, Cobb?"

"No. No next hand. I got to finish packing." He saw Sandy smiling at him. "I only won once tonight," Cobb told him. "My luck is sure lousy."

John Redbird put one hand in his pocket. His lips drew in at the corners like the mouth of a tobacco sack when the strings are pulled tight and the skin around his eyes

crinkled. He brought a small bright object into the light. "Maybe you need medicine man, Cobb. Here, you take this one."

It was a small figure of colored beads—red and yellow, blue and pale blue, orange and brown and white—strung together in the shape of an Indian, with a war bonnet of beads, with arms and hands of beads, and with two rabbit's feet for legs. Cobb had seen such talismen before. They were made by Indian craft groups and sold as curios. Probably John Redbird had bought it in a store for his own medicine, Cobb thought.

"If he's the same medicine man found the oil on your land, he's all right," Cobb said, and cradled the doll in the palm of his hand. "I can use him, John."

Rosie Redbird smiled and nodded, and John bent his head over the scrap of brown paper, adding the totals. He looked up at Cobb. "One dollar eighty."

"Okay," Cobb said, and took a small roll of bills from his pocket. There was one five dollar bill and the rest were ones. He put two one-dollar bills on the table and John Redbird extracted two dimes from a leather change purse and gave them to Cobb.

Rosie Redbird stood up and pulled her embroidered Spanish shawl close around her shoulders; every lump of her fat figure was marked by a polka-dot of her silk dress. "Cobb, you come back some time?" she asked.

"I guess so," Cobb said. "Sure. Next time I'm in Oklahoma I'll come back and we'll have us another knock rummy game."

"Good," John Redbird said.

He put out his hand, and as Cobb clasped it he felt a warm friendship for these two Indians who had come to the rig almost every night for two months to play cards with him. He dangled the medicine man. "I'll take good care of him, John, and I'll sure put him to work."

John inclined his head and walked on to the door, and

Rosie Redbird followed him as if it were her duty to step exactly in his tracks. Cobb watched them go around the slush pit to their three-thousand-dollar cabriolet, which shone in the moonlight. He sighed and turned back into the small shack that had vibrated for two months to the rhythm of the engine and the quiver of the derrick as the great bit pounded in the rock nearly a mile below. Now it was very quiet in the shack.

Sandy Lake swung his feet over the side of the bunk. "Cobb, them Indians been putting something over on you. I never seen you win yet."

"My luck is lousy, sure enough. It's been that way for a long time."

Sandy pursed his lips as if to spit, but he did not spit. "Maybe if you got another deck of cards, instead of using old John Redbird's, you'd of done better."

Cobb stared at him. "Do you suppose?" He laughed. "Hell, it was only a buck eighty."

"Yeah, and he's taken a hundred grand in oil royalties out of that allotment of his."

"Well, that's a fine thing. After the way those Indians were pushed around it's a fine thing to see 'em get a break." Cobb looked at the medicine man in his hand. "Maybe there's something to it, at that."

"So they were pushed around, were they?" Sandy said, with an air of taking the ceiling into his confidence. "Not John Redbird, though. Not at knock rummy. Don't you kid yourself, that old sinner knows all the angles."

"What I mean is the Indians were pushed off into this country because nobody thought it was any good. Look what John Redbird got—a rocky hillside and scrub oaks for a farm. But he got oil, too, so I guess there's some justice."

"He's also got your buck eighty," Sandy said.

Cobb smiled and went to finish packing his suitcase, which was propped open on a chair. Sandy sat stroking his

chin and looking at an empty pint bottle on the floor. At last he said, "Cobb, I been mulling it over. What would you say if I went down to Texas with you?"

"Well, sure. Why not? Why don't you, Sandy?"

"I'm needing a job myself," Sandy said. "And, anyhow, I believe you need somebody to watch out for you. You need somebody to keep you out of knock rummy games."

"Let up on that," Cobb said. "And if you're coming down to Texas with me you better get ready because I'm starting out first thing in the morning. Sandy, I got to get me a job in a hurry."

Sandy stretched his arms and looked again at the empty bottle. "Cobb, I'm as dry as that well out there. What do you say we start out now? Right away. Let's drive down Texas way tonight and we can stop some place and get us a quart of something. What do you say?"

Cobb considered, and glanced out at the black, slanting shapes of the derrick legs. He nodded. "Why not? Get ready and let's go. The sooner the better for me."

Cobb went out to the car and waited under the moon while Sandy packed. He was still depressed, and was eager to be on the road again; he was sure his spirits would lift when he was on the highway bound for Texas. He looked at the derrick against the moon and thought that when they drove away from the hillside rig he would leave failure behind him there in Oklahoma.

2

IN his room in a cheap hotel in Wichita Falls Cobb Walters heard the noise of wagon-wheels and awakened. He turned his head so that the sun would not fall on his face, and then sat upright to look out the window, holding back the limp shade. He saw a wagon pass with a load of water-melons and cantaloupe, and on the tailboard two children sitting, a boy and a girl. He saw their wide, wondering eyes and grinned, thinking of home, remembering when he had ridden to market with his father.

That last summer before he left the farm there had been no rain since March and the sun had risen swollen with heat. The morning breeze had faded and died, and on the prairies the windmills had not turned and the cattle had thirsted at the stock tanks, where the moss was dry as hay. Wild animals had crept desperately toward the smell of water, toward the farmhouses and the water troughs in the ranch corrals, and had died in the encircling brush. The corn had been burned and shriveled before the tassels had yet appeared, and the fruits had withered on the trees. In that summer the word had come out like a skeleton from the closet, to be spoken with an intonation of dread and sadness, and then of fatality. It was drought.

Cobb remembered how his father had stood in the farm-yard in the early morning to look at the flaming sun and listen to the rustling of the south winds that dried the corn stalks and burned the tassels black. He remembered his father's face, with the deep lines under his eyes and along beside his mouth, and he thought that now again it

was a dry year and the corn would droop its banners yet again.

Cobb swung his feet over the edge of the bed and sat looking at his thin legs, hesitating before putting his unsteady weight on his feet. His mouth burned from the yellow corn whisky he had drunk the night before, a crude liquor aged in yellow pine in the bottoms along the South Canadian. As his head cleared he reached for his khaki trousers and slipped his fingers into the right-hand pocket. He emptied out the pocket and counted all the money that he had—five one dollar bills, a fifty cent piece, a quarter, a dime and two pennies. Five dollars and eighty-seven cents.

On the other bed in the small room Sandy Lake still slept, with his legs and arms thrown out. Cobb went over and touched his shoulder. Sandy opened watery eyes to the hot sunlight and Cobb said, "Get up. It's about ten o'clock."

Cobb went to the washbowl, poured it full from a chipped white pitcher, and splashed water on his face. The water dried almost instantly on his skin and he did not feel refreshed. As he combed his hair he saw reflected in the mirror the small heap of money on the sheet worn thin and gray.

Just five dollars and eighty-seven cents, he thought. Not enough to stake me in a dice game. Just one more drunk, that's all it amounts to, and I got to stop drinking. I got to lay off that corn whisky, as hot and yellow as the noon sun, and feverish like that sun. It's burning the sap out of me like the sun burns the crops. Christ, I got to get me a job.

He picked up the money and shoved it into his pocket. Sandy was awake now and sitting up in bed. Cobb took his hat, an imitation Panama that once had been white, from a hook on the door. "I'm going down to the joint on the

corner and get some breakfast," he said. "Meet me there, Sandy."

In the café on the corner there was a thin-painted mural of white-capped peaks such as were never seen in Texas, and beneath it a machine-inked sign: *Eating Here Is Like Making Love to a Widow. You Can't Overdo It.* Cobb had seen similar signs, as humorless as a beggar's smile, in Oklahoma City and Seminole, in Fort Worth and Smackover, Arkansas. Near it was the inevitable *No Credit* sign, and as he looked at it Cobb felt the money shrink in his pocket.

He ordered chili con carne, knowing that it would be too hot to taste the meat scraps in it, and remembering that John Redbird believed that chili con carne was the finest dish devised by man. He tried to put himself in the Indian's frame of mind. John Redbird often ate six bowls at a sitting, and after oil was struck on his forty-acre allotment he was never very far from a chili parlor. Cobb remembered the medicine man and put his hand in his pocket. He touched the rabbit fur.

Sandy Lake came in then and sat beside Cobb at the counter. He looked at the bowl of chili, shuddered, and ordered soft-boiled eggs.

"I saw a paper in the hotel lobby," he said. "Saw an ad in it for a standard rig crew. Apply suite 92-B in the Camp Hotel at eleven o'clock."

Cobb raised his eyes to a nickel alarm clock behind the counter. It was a quarter to eleven. "We just got time. Did it say where the rig was at?"

"No." Sandy's pale blue eyes squinted into a hard stare. "But it's plenty fur away. You can depend on that. He comes here to hire men because there's plenty men, and no work."

Cobb nodded. He felt more depressed than before and he could taste the corn whisky again, in spite of the chili. Sandy's cold blue eyes watched him. "Wait till you see the crowd, Cobb, in suite 92-B."

"Well, it won't hurt to go see."

"No. I reckon we better go."

They walked to the hotel, to save gasoline, and it was five minutes to eleven when they entered the dim lobby. Cobb's step slowed when he saw a group of men waiting at the elevator.

"What did I tell you?" Sandy said.

These men had the tight-lipped, anxious expressions that Cobb had come to know in that depression year of 1930. He and Sandy pushed their way into the elevator with the men and walked with them along the ninth floor corridor to a room where men were crowded shoulder to shoulder, facing an interior door that connected with the bedroom of the suite. After a while there was the noise of feet uneasily shifting as a man opened the door and looked out.

"You boys read the papers, don't you?" he said. He was in his shirtsleeves, and Cobb saw that his shirt was expensive. He wore a pale blue necktie which was fastened to his shirt with a lion's head tie-clasp of gold in which there were rubies set for eyes. His face was round and high-colored and there was very little neck above his plump shoulders. His eyes were heavy-lidded.

"I want single men," he said in a quick, harsh voice. "Single men only."

He listened to the murmur of disappointment that blended into an angry noise, then said sharply, "That's the way it is. I can't take the responsibility of married men. If you got a family you just as leave go."

Cobb saw several men edge toward the door, but others waited in the anxious hope that the promoter could be persuaded to change his mind. Hadn't they been drilling ten years, fifteen years, twenty years? Hadn't they been at Seminole and Ranger and Burkburnett, seen oil running in the highway ditches, seen fifty-thousand-barrel gushers, drilled wildcats in all the corners of the Mid-Continent

field? Hadn't they met all the problems that a driller could, fished for tools, pounded bits to shape with sixteen-pound sledge hammers, cased their way through hundreds of water sands, capped wild-flowing wells, extinguished gas fires and oil fires, risked their lives, earned twenty-five dollars a day? Yes, they had experience.

"I'm gonna give it to you straight," the squat man in the doorway said. "My name is Jesse Halliday. I'm putting down a test in wildcat territory and I can't pay high wages. I got just enough to carry through, but high labor costs would bust me. But I'm willing to pay off in oil when we make a well."

"Just what do you figure you would pay?" one of the men asked. He was lean and brown and his eyes burned beneath a cowlick of black hair.

The promoter cleared his throat. "A dollar a day and board and a couple of thousand in oil."

"A dollar a day!" The brown man's voice was unsteady. "No, sir. Not me. Listen, you fellows, don't you take it. He came here to this town because he knew there was plenty out of work and he wants to beat us down. Don't you let him do it."

The man's voice was high, almost hysterical, and Cobb glanced aside. He was ashamed to hear that tone in a man's voice. It made him uneasy, and it made him dislike the man.

"If you don't want the job, buddy, you'd better move along," Jesse Halliday said. "That goes for everybody. You heard my proposition and if you don't like it, you can just go, all of you."

"Come on, you men," said the man with the brown face. "We ain't that much broke down."

He started toward the door, and three men followed him. Sandy Lake glanced at Cobb and his teeth clamped on his chew of tobacco; his lower lip nearly touched his nose.

They stood looking at each other, but neither spoke. Neither moved toward the door.

"All right, then," Jesse Halliday said. "I guess the rest of you boys ain't too proud to work. Now listen, you know what wages are in a boom field. You've heard of twenty and twenty-five dollars a day and maybe you've earned that much. I wish I could pay you like that, but I just can't do it. Those days are over. All I want is for you men to co-operate with me. That's what the whole damned world needs today is more co-operation. Labor and capital got to co-operate and maybe we'll begin to see our way clear. Maybe we'll lick this depression. It's a damned sure thing we won't lick it unless we got that co-operation. Ain't that right?"

The answering murmur of voices sounded like amens at a revival meeting. Cobb found that he had added his voice and he thought of his father. He was in his father's shoes again, walking where it was easiest.

The promoter was smiling now. "Maybe some of you boys heard of me. I'm Jesse Halliday and I've promoted some big producers in my time. But I'm a pore boy now, like the rest of you, and I got to porboy this well. I might as well put my cards on the table. I can just about do the job if I can get co-operation, and when we bring in that well you boys are going to come up to me and shake me by the hand and thank me. I'm risking all I've got and I expect you boys to take a little risk yourself. That's why I don't want no married men." He hesitated, and his glance swept around the room. "And I don't want no trouble-makers and union men. If any of you boys are thinking about unions and high wages you just as leave go, too."

No one stirred, and Halliday nodded briskly. "Now I want you men to come in here one at a time and I'll give you an interview." He nodded to Sandy Lake. "I'll take you first, old-timer."

Sandy followed the promoter into the bedroom and the

door swung shut behind them. The men looked at one another, and pipes and cigarettes were lighted. When Sandy returned he met the expectant glances with a shrug of his shoulders, and the next man in line went into the bedroom. Sandy said to Cobb, out of the side of his mouth, "I told him you and me wanted to work together."

When Cobb's turn came he found Jesse Halliday sitting on the bed, smoking a cigar. He asked Cobb his name, his age, his experience, and Cobb told him. He was twenty-five years old, and he had started at Bowlegs, in the Seminole field of Oklahoma, when it was the toughest town of all. He had drifted to the Panhandle of Texas and worked in Hutchinson County, drilling among the fractured red hills that were like slag heaps along the Canadian. He had worked out of Borger when he had earned fifteen dollars a day and paid twenty dollars a week for a room in one of the shotgun houses that sprang up with the town. He had been in Borger when there were two thousand prostitutes, when there were thirty killings in less than three years, including the district attorney and four deputies. He had been in Borger when it was called the Sodom of the Plains, where he had learned to carry a gun and where he had helped to drill a dozen wells. To make known all these things he had only to say, "I dressed tools two years in the Seminole field and two years at Borger."

Halliday waved his cigar abruptly. "All right. Go outside and wait."

Cobb waited with Sandy Lake, watching as the other men filed one by one into the bedroom. He had a tight, sickish feeling in the pit of his stomach as he saw their faces, and he wished then that he had returned long ago to his father's farm. He could work there and watch the crops grow and he would not have to ask the earth for favors. He could feel the ground under his feet there and know what was coming the next day and the day after

that and if there was calamity it was the force of nature and no man could stand against it.

"That's the last of 'em," Sandy Lake said. "I reckon we just set and wait while he makes up his mind which of us he wants."

"If it's just roustabout work, for me, I'll take it," Cobb said. "I got to have a job."

"We wouldn't none of us be here if we didn't just have to have a job, Cobb," Sandy said. "Here he is now."

Jesse Halliday paused in the doorway, with his cigar clamped in the corner of his mouth. "I'll take Lake, Rogers, Kaufman and Walters," he said. "The rest of you men can go. Sorry."

Lake, Rogers, Kaufman and Walters. Cobb grinned at Sandy, and the old driller shifted his wad of tobacco and looked around for a place to spit. Neither of them glanced at the men who were leaving.

The promoter took the cigar out of his mouth. "We're going to drill near a town called Lebanon. Any of you boys know where that is?"

Cobb's heart jumped. "Sure," he said. "I know."

"You know it, do you?" Halliday looked Cobb up and down.

"I been there," Cobb said.

"Well, I want everybody there tomorrow noon," Halliday said. "I'll show you how to get to the lease. It's on an old colored man's land, name of Abernathy."

Sandy Lake moved forward. "How far is this Lebanon?"

"About a hundred and eighty miles," Cobb said.

Again the heavy lids of the promoter's eyes lifted as he looked at Cobb. "That's right. What do you know about that country, Walters?"

"Well, I never heard of oil there," Cobb said, and grinned.

"You're going to. They were drilling a water well last

spring and they had a show of oil. We got a structure there, all right."

"But look here," Sandy said. "How do we get to this here town?"

"The trains are still running, old-timer. Last I heard they was."

"Then how about train fare?"

"You boys will just have to get there yourself. Hell, I'm giving you two thousand in oil."

"That's if and when money," Sandy said. "They don't take that at the ticket office, and I got no money for train fare."

"Me neither," said the man called Rogers. He was about Sandy's age and bald. With his hook nose and thick-lensed spectacles he resembled a vulture.

Jesse Halliday scratched his lower lip. "I suppose I can give you an advance on wages. All right, I'll do that. I'll let you have five bucks each."

The four men waited in silence as Halliday took a loose roll of bills from his pocket. His short fingers peeled off four five-dollar bills. Kaufman held his bill in his hand and winked at Cobb. He was a year or so older than Cobb, and his loosely parted lips gave him an oafish, sensual expression.

"All right, then," Jesse Halliday said. "Just you boys be sure and show up in Lebanon tomorrow. I'm going to board you at Mrs. Joplin's place, beginning tomorrow evening. She's a widow woman and the street she lives on is called Persimmon Street."

Cobb walked with Sandy Lake to the elevator. Sandy's head was slightly bowed, and in the elevator he said, "A man's pretty bad off when he has to do this. He's pretty bad off."

"Well, it's a job," Cobb said.

Sandy grunted, and as they crossed the lobby he said softly, "Son, do you know how many wildcat wells are

dry? Well, I'll tell you. Sixteen out of seventeen. That's what the figures show. Sixteen out of seventeen."

They came out into the sunlight. In the morning air Wichita Falls looked precise and clean and prosperous. The boom days of oil were gone, but oil had left its mark. Across the street was a tall building, built by oil that had poured from deep beneath the prairie not fifteen miles away. The man who had built it was broke now, Cobb knew. And a block away was another building that thrust in stiff importance above the flat roofs of the town. It had been built by an oil man and he, too, had lost his fortune. For nearly every large building there was a story of quick riches and grandiose expansion and great reverses. But being broke as those men were broke was not being broke in the way that Cobb knew. It did not mean the necessity of working for a dollar a day and a promise. There was no grandeur in being broke the way Cobb was broke.

Sandy Lake touched his arm. "Look here, I'll meet you at that flophouse in fifteen minutes. Is that all right?"

"Sure," Cobb said. He walked away, his steps lagging. Now that he had found work he did not feel set up. He knew that he would eat, and that was all. For a month or so he would have no immediate worries, that was all.

When Sandy Lake met him at the car he carried a quart bottle wrapped in brown paper. He grinned and opened the package. "What do you say we start off right?"

Cobb put out his hand for the bottle, then hesitated. His eyes crinkled in the strong light as he smiled. "Not for me, Sandy. Not no more. I got me a job now."

Cobb drove out of town on the highway southeast of Wichita Falls. The surface sands of the Permian red beds had sifted over the road and left a purple glow, soothing to the eyes. Cobb's foot pressed hard on the accelerator and he hardly listened to Sandy, who held the bottle in his lap and talked steadily. Cobb had heard so many drillers talk when they were drinking, and all they talked was oil.

Always oil. Now it was of the mud hub-deep on the roads around Seminole that Sandy spoke, of oil flowing in the ravines deep enough to cover a man's body, as it often had, of pipelines laid in the highway ditches. Cars stuck on the main streets, overturned on the roads, nitroglycerine trucks blown to hell and gone without a trace, gas lurking in sinister shallows of the land and ignited by the spark of a passing automobile. Take Wichita Falls there. It used to be an Indian village, a trading post, a cowtown served by ox team and wagon. Then they struck oil and men set up shop on the sidewalks; they knocked out store front and roped off office space to sell stock and royalty interests. A man had his office in his hat in those days, and he was in business if he just had a map, but now they have twelve-story office buildings and fine paved streets and big hotels and you can get a job, if you're lucky, for a dollar a day.

The countryside had changed and the purple-red sand gave way to rich black soil. Cobb saw that there had been more rain this way. There were patches on the slopes where the grass was green, and the hills rolled out in long sweeps, and when they reached the hilltops the country lay open ahead, with pale hills in the distance and the land a soft blue leading up to them and the gentle gray rolls of the middle distance etched against the blue. Cobb breathed deeply, his spirit feeling free as once again he saw this country, and after a while he began to sing softly an old tune he had always known: "Raising sweet potatoes on sandy land, the only way to make a living on sandy land. . . ."

Sandy Lake listened, then turned red-rimmed eyes to Cobb. "What are you so damned happy about?"

"Happy?" Cobb laughed. "Well, I ought to be happy. I'm going home. I was born right outside of Lebanon."

3

THEY had come now to country that Cobb knew well, that he had seen in all seasons. The last time the roads had been inches thick in white dust, with the hilltops bare and glaring in the sunlight, with the leaves brown as autumn on the trees, with the whole countryside swallowed in the hot throat of drought. And now again the hills were bare on the crests, where the soil was spread thin over a stratum of limestone, and the river was low and no water flowed in the creeks.

They crossed the river three miles north of Lebanon and turned east on a gravel road that led across a prairie to a railroad station with the name *Devant* in huge black letters on a white field. The station consisted of a shed and platform where Ardmore Devant had kept the cottonseed cake shipped to him to feed his registered herd, and next to it were the corrals from which he had sent the beef to market. The feedhouse and the corrals were on the right of way of the old Lebanon & County Railroad, on which no trains had run for a year.

Cobb drove on across the weed-grown tracks and followed a narrow road running between barbed wire fences nearly concealed by sunflowers. The road rose over a rocky hill, scarred on the top where limestone had been quarried for building, and descended into a valley that Cobb remembered well. On the right appeared the cedar fenceposts that marked the boundaries of the Devant ranch, and in a pasture fat Hereford cattle had formed a file toward the pecan trees marking the course of Fossil Creek.

There was a quarter section on the creek, surrounded by the acres of the Devant ranch, that was home to Cobb. He had been born in the old clapboard house there and he had grown up on the farm and helped to plow and plant and harvest the hundred and sixty acres of wheat and cotton and fruit and papershell pecans. Beneath the tall grass the soil was rich and black, formed by the sediment of an ancient sea, and there was limey water and shade trees in abundance along the creek; trees for timber for the house, for fenceposts and firewood.

Cobb's father had a way of telling the story of how he came to Texas that made him seem a gay and reckless youth who could handle horses and fan a gun from the hip. We was back in Montezuma, Kansas, he would say, when we heard they was fixing to open up the Cherokee Strip. I kept store there and I set up in business the day a railroad spur from Dodge City reached Montezuma. But the railroad failed and the only glory Montezuma had left was in that there Aztec name.

They would be chopping cotton in the summer sun, with the waxy black soil making great damp clods of their feet; they would be knocking pecans from the laden branches with long cane poles. And Cobb's father would talk about the Run and in time it came to be an explanation to his son that had lost its meaning through much repetition and through years of humble tilling of the soil. I took and bought two wagons, he would say. I bought a light spring wagon for the Run and I had a strong team of grays, and then I had a heavy wagon for your Maw to drive behind me and I had it loaded down with spanking new equipment. And I'd sold off my stock in Montezuma, Cobb, and I had a right smart stack of greenbacks in a box under the wagonseat.

Tom Walters had been one of a hundred thousand who dashed into the Strip on that cool September day in 1893. In the rush there were men on horseback, men in wagons

and buggies, men on trains which were held down to fifteen miles an hour with stops every five miles, and even a few men on high-wheeled bicycles. Men so hungry for the rich, flat land of the Cherokee Strip that one of them used his spurs before the bugle blew at noon and a trooper shot him dead.

Farming the quarter section on Fossil Creek, that had been a section once, that had been parceled off and sold until there remained one hundred and sixty acres, Tom Walters would talk about the five million acres of the Cherokee Strip and the sweet claim he had staked where a creek made a fork and there was a high bluff to build a house.

Well, he would say, maybe it's better here on Fossil Creek. We got good soil here and plenty of wood and native pecan trees that are just as good as gov'ment bonds. But it was a fine farm there in the Strip, Cobb. You should of seen your Maw's face. I had to gallop twenty-odd miles to Enid to register my claim at the land office, and when I got back next day she was there and we pitched our tent and hobbled the horses to graze in that tall, dry grass. By sundown she'd already laid out where to build the house and where to dig the well and where to fix her a chicken run. You know how she is about raising chickens. And, boy, it was a pretty sight to see that night on the prairie that had been just as God made it the day before. There were campfires burning as far as you could see, and we had a fire going and I spaded up some sod and crumbled it in my hands and it was good. If I'd of thought I'd of hitched up the team to the plow and run a furrow all around my claim.

If his father had thought to plow a furrow. If his father had put the money in a bank. Such considerations had always slipped by when it came to the description of the fire that had swept that night over the dry grass of the Cherokee Strip. It had burned away the tall grass that would

have supplied fodder for the winter, natural hay cured on the stalk; it had burned away Tom Walters' tent and both his wagons; it had burned his equipment and the box of currency hidden under the wagonseat. They had escaped on horseback, on the team of grays, and Tom Walters never took a chance after that.

He had sold his claim for fifty dollars and turned toward Texas to face the winter. In Lebanon he had found work, and when the Texas school lands were opened for settlement he had taken up a section on Fossil Creek and built a house and planted his cotton at the first cry of the whip-poorwill and fed his family, and he never took another chance.

Cobb was coming now to Fossil Creek and he thought of all those things that had been told him so often in his boyhood. The road forded the creek over a slab of stone where normally there was a wash of clear water into a deep pool where dragonflies hovered, and where now a scissortail perched on the rim of a water's-edge cowtrack to drink. Cobb stopped the car and got out to open a gate leading to an old wagon road that followed the course of the creek. Sandy Lake was asleep, with his hat tipped over his eyes.

The road was high-centered, with ruts worn deep by the wheels of wagons taking produce to market. Many times Cobb had ridden to Lebanon in the wagon, to sit all day on the public square and hawk melons and green corn. Peaches for thirty cents a bushel; Bermuda onions at five cents for three pounds; cantaloupe at five for a nickel. It was very little money, but to Tom Walters it was cash money and he looked on it as found money. It grew on the trees and in the fields, and it bought flour and cloth and store shoes for his family.

The road dropped away to the creek bed and leveled off. For fifty yards it ran beside the creek, across from a sharp bluff with a high ledge of shale and an exposed out-

crop of limestone that plunged downward and bit into the earth, leaving sharp protuberances like a flight of steps on the face of the bluff. Often Cobb had climbed those stones, and he had wedged out of the shale white fossils—shells and flat spiral ammonites that were evidence of the shallow sea that in Cretaceous time had covered this country. Fossils were used for doorweights in his father's house.

At the end of the bluff the road rose steeply, and Cobb shifted gears to climb it. The nose of the car lifted, pointing at the pale sky, then it fell away and he saw the trees and the house among the tall pecans a hundred yards away. Tom Walters had often said that each one of those pecan trees was the same as a thousand-dollar government bond. Each tree yielded from two to five hundred pounds of pecans in the fall and the nuts brought from ten to twenty-five cents a pound in Lebanon. As much as the interest on a thousand-dollar bond, Tom Walters maintained.

Cobb drove to the picket fence, on which there was still a trace of red that he had helped to paint. He stopped and got out of the car, looking at the house. The porch sagged now at one corner, Cobb noticed, and there were shingles missing from the roof. There at the side of the house, by the kitchen door, a huge liveoak had stood, but now he saw only a short stump, on which a churn rested. Cobb frowned. One night when they had been at supper in the kitchen the tree had saved their lives. A bolt of lightning had struck and shattered its trunk six feet above the ground, but they had packed the wound with cement and the tree still had lived.

Cobb's mother opened the kitchen door and paused in the doorway. She seemed old as she peered nearsightedly at Cobb. Her hair was gray now and damp strings of it fell beside her face. She came forward uncertainly a few steps, nervously wiping her hands on her apron.

"Now, say," Cobb called out. "You ought to put on your specs and you'd know who I am."

"Cobb! Is that you, son?"

Cobb vaulted over the fence. "It's me, all right." He hurried toward her and caught both her hands, feeling the bones brittle beneath his fingers.

"Well, I declare," his mother said. "It's about time, son. I declare it is. Let me look at you."

"You know you can't see me without your specs."

"They get so misty in this hot weather. But I can see you, Cobb." Her fingers clung to his. "You're home to stay, ain't you?"

"Not exactly home, Mom, but I'll be close by. I'm working on a drilling rig not two miles off. On old Abernathy's place."

"Don't tell me that's Cobb!" a voice called from the porch. Cobb saw his father standing at the head of the steps, his eyes shaded by one hand.

"Hello, Dad."

They met at the foot of the steps, and as they shook hands Tom Walters said, "I swear I'm glad to see you.—Cobb, we sure have missed you here." His eyes were bright and had a twinkle of humor that was lacking in Cobb's eyes. But his shoulders seemed more stooped and his long mustache was grayer than before.

"I wish I could have come home sooner," Cobb said. "I tell you, I didn't think I'd been away so long Mom wouldn't recognize me."

"Without my specs I don't see good, Cobb," his mother said. "You know that."

"Ada broke her specs a while back," Tom Walters explained.

"Then she ought to get some more."

His father said quickly, "Cobb, what brings you home?"

"What brings him!" cried Ada Walters. "Ain't it high time? I was beginning to believe he wasn't ever coming back."

"I got me a job here," Cobb said. "I'll be drilling an oil

well yonder over the rise. My partner is asleep there in the car."

"Say, there's money in oil wells," Tom Walters said. "I rode over yonder yesterday and looked at the rig. Son, you reckon it will amount to anything?"

"I sure hope so."

They climbed to the porch and Cobb sat down on the railing, beside the hanging water bucket, and took a dipperful of water. "Dad, I miss that old liveoak," he said. "What happened to it?"

"We had to cut it down, Cobb. It died on us."

"It makes a change."

"Well, boy, there are lots of changes." Tom Walters' voice trailed off, and he cleared his throat.

Cobb frowned and glanced at his mother. She was sitting in an old rocking chair that had a seat of plaited rawhide, and she sat very still, with her bony hands folded in her lap. "Tom, you'd better tell him," she said.

"Tell me what?"

"We're thinking of moving off, son." Her voice was thin, courageous. "You see, your father is just too old to do the work. Maybe you don't notice it, but he's broke down. He's more broke down than I am. So we thought we'd just upstake and move some place else and start us a little chicken farm. If we can just find a place, that is."

"Now wait," Cobb said. "You can't do that. Say, how long have we been here?"

"It was the summer of eighteen ninety-seven when I took this land up," Tom Walters said. "So it's thirty-three years, Cobb."

"Now ain't it about time we made a change?" Ada asked.

"No, it ain't," Cobb said harshly. He stood up, and walked to the end of the porch and back. There was an evasion in his mother's manner that made his spine stiffen. He asked abruptly, "What's this all about? Dad, what's this about a chicken farm?"

"You know how your mother is about chickens, Cobb. And times are hard. You know that."

"Yes, sure."

"And cotton ain't the cash crop it used to be. It ain't like the old days. I remember back in nineteen six this county ginned forty-two thousand bales of cotton, but this year we won't make two thousand bales and we won't git nothing for it when we do. So I tell you what we got in mind, Cobb. We're going to take and sell this farm, and Ardmore Devant is kind enough to want to buy it."

"Kind enough?" Cobb's hands clenched on the back of a chair. "He's always been after this land."

"Yes, he has. It's right in the middle of his ranch and he'd like to have it. But times are hard for him, too, Cobb, and he don't want to pay out money. He lost a lot on his herd this year."

"He didn't even make up his feed bill," Ada Walters said quickly. "Cobb, don't you think thirty dollars an acre is a fair price?"

"When you consider this land is worn out," Tom Walters put in. "We have a big fertilizer bill every year." He saw the expression of Cobb's face and glanced away, but went on talking. "Cobb, this is how it is. I'm just so deep in debt. It used to be, when you were here to help, that the work was easy and you and me would work the Devant cattle and we'd pay out our debt that way. But now I'm just too old to help with the ranch work and tend to the farm as well. And you ain't here to help."

Cobb nodded, and he was thinking of the days in Borger when he had earned fifteen dollars a day. He had sent nothing home to his parents. He had never thought to do so.

"Every years it's added up," his father said. "I ain't ever been able to get even. I'd go down to the bank and see Mr. Devant and fix a loan and when I made my crop I never could quite pay it off, and the next year I was owing

a little bit more. Cobb, I'm owing two thousand dollars now and the south winds done burned up the corn and the weeds are choking out what's left of the cotton. I been laid up and I just couldn't tend to it." He shook his head dolefully, but the twinkle was in his eyes. "I learned the farmer's lesson. A farmer has got to have him seven sons so some of 'em will stay home to do the work.—But I ain't blaming you, Cobb."

"Mr. Devant wants to move his cow hands into this house," Ada Walters said. "We wanted to sell him just a hundred acres and stay here and go to raising chickens, but he don't want it that way. He wants the house, too." She smiled and leaned over to touch Cobb's hand. "But don't you fret about it. We'll find us a little place somewhere and like as not we'll be better off with a smaller place, and just a few chickens to look after."

Cobb saw his father's nod, a humble tilting of his head, and heard him say, "I believe we can manage all right. It will be kind of a new start for us, Cobb."

"Now listen, Dad. Maybe next year it will be better. Maybe next year the depression will be over and there'll be plenty of rain and you can sell your cotton at a good price and you can pay up. Why don't you wait and see?"

"Mr. Devant don't want to carry me for another year, son, and I got no way to raise the money."

Cobb could not speak for a moment. He turned his head aside, then said hoarsely, "Dad, I'm broke. I come home empty-handed and it makes me ashamed to say it. I'm working for a dollar a day, that's all." His voice deepened. "But if we make a well I'll get paid off in oil. I'll get two thousand dollars. If we just make a well."

Cobb glanced at his mother, who sat stiffly in the weathered porch chair, fanning herself with a palmetto fan that still faintly showed the red lettering of a grocer's advertisement. He got to his feet. "I believe I'll take a walk down the creek."

"In about an hour we'll have supper, son," his mother said slowly. "You and your friend will stay the night, at least?"

"Yes," Cobb said. "We'll stay."

"Did I mention Jan Devant was back?"

Cobb breathed in quickly. "No. I thought she was in New York City or some place."

"She came home about six months ago. She rides over here right often, and she's asked about you, Cobb. Now you're back you'd ought to go up to the Devant house and say hello."

"No, sir," Cobb said. He walked away, through the yard and out past the barn. All the years came back to him as he looked at the familiar folds of the land, spread gently like a patchwork quilt caressingly tucked. Once this farm had been all the world to him, and again he felt that the world had closed in around this quarter section and this was all there was—the barn and the creek down below, the corrals where he had worked, strutting in his overalls and bare feet and pretending that he wore chaps and a pair of Texas star boots.

The first time he had ever spent a night away from home was that summer when he had followed the thresher and had visited in farmhouses throughout Lebanon County. It had been his first social life and he thought, times like that I won't ever see again. There was Dolly Goback talking to me, looking at me in the field, bringing me the water jug. I never knew what she was after, not until I came back from Kansas City. I rode on the stock car and watered the Devant cattle all the way to the stockyards and Kansas City was so big that I wanted to stay in the railroad yards but there was that fellow who took me along to that house on a side street where there were women who talked as rough as a man. I was scared that time, and when I got home I was ashamed to look my folks in the eye. But it was only a couple of days after that I saddled my horse and

rode off to the Goback place and I knew what I was about and I knew then why Dolly Goback had been smiling at me in the field.

Cobb turned past the barn along a cowpath leading to the creek. Down in the creek bottom he had played Indians with Jan Devant and her brother. He passed an Osage orange tree from which they had cut branches to fashion bows and arrows. The tree was called bois d'arc because the Indians had used its branches for their bows, and in this country it was pronounced bodark and the fruit it bore were called bodark apples. He walked along the creek to the high bluff where the jutting limestone formed stairs along its face, and he started to climb it once again.

Here near the top we'd lay in ambush and once Jan Devant rode past on her Shetland pony and she had that silver-studded saddle and a Navajo saddle blanket and I remember I ambushed her and shot my arrow and it hit that pony on the flank. He bolted and throwed her and, God, I was scared. I was scared she was killed or bad hurt and I scrambled down to the sand and run over to her and my eyes was bugging open. First she raised up her head and then she got to her knees and then to her feet and then she laid off and hit me square on the mouth with all she had.

Cobb laughed aloud as he sat on the ledge of limestone with his feet dangling twenty feet above the creek. It was the first time he had laughed that day.

"Who's that?" a sharp voice asked.

Cobb had not heard the horse's hoofs. He looked down and saw her with the reins drawn in, her feet braced in the stirrups. She wore jodhpurs and a dude ranch shirt with saddle-stitching and slash pockets, and a ten-gallon hat over her black hair. Cobb gazed down at her.

She was always beautiful, he thought, but now she's got an iced-over look. Like a wood carving shellacked and set in a store window. Remote and high-priced, he thought. She was a tall woman and the jodhpurs made her legs seem

even longer. Her face was broad and all her features were large, but the contours of her face softened its bold modeling.

"Don't tell me it's Cobb Walters?" the girl said.

"It sure is." Cobb drew in his legs and climbed down to the creek. He planted his feet on the sand of the creek bed.

Jan's brown eyes had a steady, curious expression. "So you've come home at last, Cobb?"

"Just for tonight." He moved forward and patted the neck of her horse, a palomino with a golden buff coat and a nearly white mane and tail. "I came back to see my folks again," he added.

"And time you did, Cobb. They've missed you." She smiled down at him. "It looks like you're even taller than you were, but you've filled out some."

"Yes," Cobb said. He was self-conscious as he always had been with Jan Devant. He had always been the farm boy down the creek, he thought, the boy who helped round up the Devant cattle and dip them in the stained dipping vat, clip off their horns in the dehorning chute, brand them and drive them to the railroad.

"What are you doing now, Cobb?" Jan asked. "Haven't you been drilling wildcats or something?"

"Yes, I'm in the oil business. They're starting a test south of here and I'm going to dress tools.—Pretty hot for swinging a sixteen-pound sledge hammer, ain't it?"

"I suppose that's where you got those wide shoulders." The girl's eyes were half-closed as she looked down at him. "Cobb, you know Father is responsible for that well, don't you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Yes. Last spring when they were drilling a water well for a stock tank in the west pasture they found a little oil, so he and Ralph Paige decided an oil well would bring new business to Lebanon."

"You don't mean Ardmore is putting up the money?" Cobb asked.

"No. You know Father better than that." Jan laughed. "He and Ralph Paige got together a block of land, about four thousand acres, I think, and tried to persuade a big company to drill, but they weren't interested."

"Sure," Cobb said. "They'd rather have some little fellow do the wildcatting and then move in and take over."

"I guess that's what happened, because this Mr. Halliday showed up and agreed to drill a well. He's buying the lumber and his fuel and all that here in town, so it will help Lebanon some even if we don't find the oil."

"Maybe we'll find it," Cobb said. "I know one thing. My folks won't sell their farm without they reserve the mineral rights."

Jan patted her horse's neck, her eyes lowered. She said softly, "I know you hate to see it sold, Cobb."

"Yes, I do."

"Well, it's a shame, but times are hard. You know, Father is pressed for money. He lost twenty dollars a head on the feed bill last year. He had to sell five hundred head of cattle for just what he paid for them and he lost the feed bill. That's ten thousand dollars!"

"It's a lot of money," Cobb said in a tight, strained voice, thinking of the two thousand dollars his father owed to Ardmore Devant's bank.

"He's not going to feed any more," Jan said. "I just don't know what's happened to the cattle market. Why, we've been feeding cottonseed cake on grass for years. It's always been cake on grass, since the first cow chewed a cotton seed in a gully where they threw the hulls after the cotton was ginned."

"I don't know what there is to do about it," Cobb said. "It's hard on everybody and it sure is hard on my folks. They've lived in that house for thirty-three years, and Dad built it. I was born there."

"Land just wears out," Jan said. "Like people do."

Cobb nodded. There were other things he wanted to say, but he could not say them. He stood looking at the sweep of her black hair under the beige hat, at her strong brown fingers with the nails painted red, and at length he said, "You've been married since I seen you last, Jan. I'm a little late with my congratulations."

She shook her head slightly. "You're a good deal too late. Didn't you know? I'm Jan Devant again."

"Divorced?"

She nodded. "Cobb, I have to ride back to the house. But I want you to come and see us some time."

"I'm a working man," Cobb said. "Twelve hours a day for me. Why don't you stop in at the lease and see us drill an oil well?"

"Maybe I will." She waved one hand lightly and turned her palomino back along the creek toward the big white ranch house, hidden from view by the trees of the creek bottom.

Cobb watched her out of sight, then turned in the other direction. He climbed the rise of ground and walked with lagging steps over to the car. Sandy was awake and Cobb smiled at him. "How you feeling?"

"I guess I'm getting old. I guess my guts are rotted out, Cobb, from all the bad whisky in places like Kiefer and on Bishop's Alley and out in Borger on the Line. I guess I'm too old for it. What do you think?"

"I'll tell you what I think, old-timer," Cobb said in a tense, stirred tone. "And I've been thinking plenty. I've been thinking that what I'm going to do is I'm going to get mine. I don't know how I'm going about it, but that's what I'm going to do."

"Do we eat here?" Sandy asked.

4

THEY drove to the lease the next morning on a rural delivery road that wound over rocky hillsides and through sandy bottom land, across pastures and over cattle guards in the barbed wire fences. Cobb had hunted quail and plover in the pasture land and possums in the bottoms. He had fished for crappie and catfish in the slow-flowing river that wound incredibly among low hills that were knobby with scrub growth. On a table above the river, among irregular hills that showed where long ago the earth's crust had buckled, were Abraham Abernathy's forty acres. They saw his shack of two-by-fours and sheet iron and tin liver pill and cut-plug signs when they were yet a long way off. The road climbed up to it.

As a boy Cobb had thought that Abernathy was the wisest old man in the world. He knew that if the bottom rail of a log fence was laid in the wane of the moon it would never rot, and that in the dark of the moon you must plant crops that matured below the ground, in the light of the moon those that grew above; he could tell you how to protect your chickens from hawks by nailing a horseshoe in the fireplace, how to cure warts by stealing a dishrag and hiding it in a secret place, how to ward off goblins by turning your pockets inside out at night, and any number of portents that he saw in the moon and the stars.

"I see the rig," Sandy said. "Look, Cobb, there she is."

Cobb's eyes turned to the climbing, cross-hatched timbers

of the derrick, then strayed back to Abernathy's shack, off to the left under a blackjack oak tree.

"I want to stop here a minute, Sandy," he said. "That old nigro used to take me fishing when I was a kid. I believe I'll stop and say howdy."

Cobb turned the car to the side of the road and stepped out into tall sage grass, in which the cactus pears were purple. He walked through the grass toward Abernathy's shack, and when he turned the corner of the shack he stepped back into his boyhood. Abernathy was sitting on an up-ended keg, smoking his pipe, and his head rested against the yellow and black letters of an advertisement for cut-plug tobacco that was a part of his house. A tattered felt hat was pulled low over his eyes. He wore overalls and a faded denim shirt, and his feet were bare, the toes knobby and spread as if he were standing in river mud. The skin around the old man's eyes crinkled when he saw Cobb.

"Howdy, Abernathy," Cobb said. "Remember me?"

"Cobb, boy, how is you?" The old Negro put his hand down beside him and brought it up with a tobacco tin. He held the tin out to Cobb, and Cobb took a package of cigarette papers from the pocket of his shirt and began rolling a cigarette.

"You bin gone de longes' time," the old man said. "Boy, you sho' is growed. You's a man, now. Many de time I t'ought about you down on de ribber. You'n me sho' had some good times togedder. How de fish bitin', Cobb?"

"Not so good," Cobb said. "Not so good for me."

Abernathy turned his head. His horse was cropping grass a few feet away, with its ears pressed flat to its ugly head. Against the wall of the shack leaned several cane poles. Abernathy squinted at the sun. "Dey be bitin' now, Cobb."

"I can't spare the time, Abernathy. I'm a working man. I'm going to drill that oil well over yonder."

"Is you fo' a fack?" The old Negro nodded his head decisively. "I always say it, Cobb. You hear me say it, din't

you? You bet. Time 'n time agin. De fust time I predic' it was back in nineteen sevumteen, when dey was drillin' ober to Ranger."

"Predicted what?" Cobb asked. "I was just a kid in nineteen seventeen."

"Oil," said Abernathy. "Yes, suh, man, we's wifout a doubt a-settin' dis minute on top de bigges' lake er oil in de worl'. You could row a boat in her. You could flood de ribber wif her. Boy, it's under dese heah hills." He pointed a long finger at the ground. "Just dere, Cobb. Sometimes I kin smell it."

"You been right plenty often," Cobb said. "I sure hope you're right this time."

"Down along de creck," Abernathy said. "Sometimes you kin smell it jus' as plain."

Cobb smiled and turned away, but Abernathy called him back. "Boy, you want to do somep'n fo' an ol' colored man?"

"Sure. What do you want, Abernathy?"

"A silber dolla. Will you git one fo' me, Cobb?"

"Sure thing."

"I'll give you a greenback fo' it. Boy, you kin go down to de bank and git all de silber dollas you takes a want to, but dey won't givum to me."

"I'll get you as many as you can carry," Cobb promised, and walked back to the car.

He grinned at Sandy. "The stars say we're going to make an oil well."

"I guess the stars know as much about it as anybody."

Cobb started the car. "Just for that old nigro I'd like it to come true," he said. "He used to come a-runnin' when they blew the slave horn and I'd like to see it, when Gabriel blows for him, that he'd ride up in a Packard." Cobb chuckled, and looked at the derrick ahead of them. "You know, Sandy, from whichever way you come you climb to this location. That looks good."

"It does," Sandy said. "But an elevation on the surface don't mean you got an elevation a mile down yonder, Cobb."

"It could, though. And plenty of wells have been drilled just because the country looks like some producing area. This here reminds me of Ranger. How'd you like to bring in a well like the old McCleskey and start a boom like Ranger, Sandy, and take out more oil than all the gold in the Klondike, like they did at Ranger?"

They were passing beside a rock fence, beyond which the derrick stood, a hundred yards away. Cobb stopped the car, and they climbed over the fence and walked through prairie grass to the rig.

Sandy looked overhead at the timbers of the derrick against the whitish sky, then at the tools laid out. He squinted at Cobb. "It's a porboy if ever I seen one. Cobb, it's second-hand tools." He walked over to the bull wheel shaft, on which the drilling cable was wound, and nodded. "The cable anyhow is new."

They went together to examine the sand reel, the calf wheel, the band wheel and engine. All showed evidence of use. And the boiler was an old cotton gin boiler, crusty with rust.

"He's been to the junk man, all right," Sandy said. "Let's look those bits over."

On the grass beside the rig the great bits had been put down. Sandy peered at them, frowning. "Just look at 'em, Cobb. We'll be dressing tools pretty near every screw we drill." He stood erect. "For a dollar a day. A dollar a day and a promise."

"We're going to make an oil well," Cobb said. "The stars said so, and the funny thing is old Abernathy is pretty often right. He said he smelled oil down on the creek."

Sandy grunted. He spread his feet wide apart and gazed overhead. "Want to take a look upstairs?"

Cobb put his hat on the lazy bench and climbed the der-

rick to the crown block eighty-four feet above the ground. He inspected the crown pulley and the sand line and casing pulleys, and daubed axle grease on the hardwood pulley grooves. He knew that he would climb aloft many times before the well was drilled in, for it was the tool dresser's duty to grease the crown block at noon and midnight, and there was always danger of fire from ungreased wooden grooves. The last rig he had worked on had a steel crown block.

From the top of the rig he could see off to the east the acres of the Devant ranch and the line of the railroad embankment more than two miles away. He saw the winding course of the river and beyond it the green tree-line of Fossil Creek and the house where his parents had lived for thirty-three years, where he had been born. To the north was a row of rugged, knobby hills, covered with blackjack oak trees, and to the south lay Lebanon, four miles away. As he looked toward town he saw two automobiles near at hand on the road, approaching the rig.

Cobb climbed down from the crown block, and as he set foot on the rig floor the cars came to a stop. Three men got out of the first, two the second. One was Jesse Halliday, and he was wearing a linen suit and tan and white shoes, and he chewed a long cigar with the band still on it to show its quality. One of the men with him was tall and thin and Cobb recognized the iron-gray hair and the stiff carriage of head.

The men in the second car were the other members of the drilling crew, Joe Rogers and Bill Kaufman. Rogers approached Sandy Lake, his eyes blinking behind thick-lensed spectacles. "You looked it over yet?"

"Yeah, we seen it." Sandy spoke in a low tone. "It's all junk stuff. I suppose you noticed those bits?"

Rogers turned to inspect the tools and Jesse Halliday called from the slush pit, where he stood with the two men

who had accompanied him to the rig, "I see you boys made it all right. That's fine. Ready to go to work, are you?"

"I reckon we are," Sandy said.

"Boys, this here is Mr. Ardmore Devant, president of the Lebanon National Bank," Halliday said.

Ardmore Devant gazed at Cobb. His neck was wrinkled like a turtle's and he had eyes sharp as a turtle's. "Hello there, Cobb Walters," he said. "My daughter told me you'd come home."

"Howdy, Mr. Devant."

Ardmore cleared his throat. "Cobb, I want to have a talk with you one of these days."

"I'll be right here, Mr. Devant."

The banker turned to Jesse Halliday. "This is one of our local boys you have working for you, Mr. Halliday."

"Is that so?" There was distrust in the promoter's glance at Cobb, in the lift of his thick eyelids. "Walters, you didn't tell me this was your home town."

"You didn't ask me where I came from," Cobb said.

Halliday turned away and Cobb saw a short, fat man grinning at him. "Don't you remember me, Cobb? I'm Anson North."

"Well, how are you?" Cobb said, and put out his hand.

"Anson, don't tell me you've got an interest in this here well?"

"I own a quarter section in the block.—Cobb, ain't this a good elevation? There was an oil man said it was just right. We ought to make a well. I'm going to supply fuel for the rig, so I got a small interest in the operation. I get a share of the oil in return for the fuel." Anson North smiled. "You know me, Cobb. I couldn't pass up anything like this. I had to get in on it."

Cobb glanced at Jesse Halliday, who stood beside the slush pit, talking to Ardmore Devant. Sandy Lake caught his eye and Cobb joined him on the lazy bench in the shade of the derrick.

"I tell you something," Cobb said. "He got the fuel for the rig on credit. Anson North owns the big garage in Lebanon and he runs bulk gasoline in tank wagons in this district. He gets a share in the well for supplying the fuel."

"You don't say?" Sandy grinned. "He's the porest por-boy I ever seen. You know what he's up to now?"

"No."

"Well, it's an easy guess. That's the local banker he's talking to, and my guess is he's trying to borrow some dough. As far as I can see, he don't want to lay out a cent of his own."

Jesse Halliday approached them, chewing nervously on his cigar, and said to Sandy, "We're going to spud in at noon tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Say, we're ready to go now, soon as we get up a head of steam."

"Well, the town is going to make sort of a thing of it," the promoter said. "A picnic and all that."

"Jehosophat," Sandy said.

Jesse Halliday smiled. "Lake, suppose you take Mr. Devant and show him over the rig. Explain a little of it to him."

Sandy walked away and the promoter sat down beside Cobb on the lazy bench. He fished for a match, struck it, and was a long time lighting the stub of his cigar. Then he said in a low tone, "I'm convinced we've got a structure here, Walters. We're going to make an oiler, beyond a doubt." He puffed his cigar. "So you come from Lebanon County?"

"I can see the house where I was born from the top of the rig."

"Well, we got the whole town behind us," Halliday said casually. "I don't want to lose their support." He gave Cobb a close glance. "You men have got as much to gain as I have and I guess you'll stick by me, won't you?"

"I don't see why not," Cobb said.

"The worst thing that can happen to a man is to get discouraged," Halliday went on. "I don't want this town to get discouraged. Let's keep looking at the silver lining, no matter what happens, and if we do I'm convinced we'll make an oil well."

"I hope so," Cobb said. "I can use that two grand."

Jesse Halliday got to his feet. "So let's keep things humming. How about it?"

"Why not?" Cobb said.

The promoter went to meet Ardmore Devant, and Sandy Lake returned to the lazy bench. "About the towers, Cobb, you want to work with me?"

"You bet."

"Well, I told Halliday we'd take the afternoon tower and Kaufman and Rogers will take the morning tower. Okay?"

"Sure."

"Then let's get the hell out of here. Where do you buy your liquor around here?"

"You can get pretty good corn down on the river. We'll see about it. But first we better go on out to the Joplin place and get settled. Those people are old friends of mine, Sandy. I used to board with Nora Joplin when I went to high school in Lebanon."

They drove to town in Cobb's car. It was four miles to Lebanon, and the road ran straight to the courthouse with its limestone clock tower tipped with tin. They approached the town from the north, crossing railroad tracks where tall weeds and sunflowers grew among the ties. Cobb pointed out two locomotives that stood rusting beside the station, which had been boarded up, across from the cotton compress, which would gin little cotton that fall.

"The town built this railroad," Cobb explained. "The main line passed Lebanon up by fifteen miles and a long time ago the town formed a company and sold stock and everybody pitched in and helped grade the line. It's the

Lebanon and County Railroad, but we always called it the Nancy Hanks. I don't know why."

"It's a name they got for one-horse railroads," Sandy said. "It's because of the pacing horse by that name."

"Anyhow, the railroad failed last fall and they discontinued service," Cobb said. "Now they want to sell off those locomotives and the old passenger cars down by the station."

Cobb drove slowly up the hill to the public square, looking eagerly around him at the familiar landmarks of the town. It had been named after Colonel Alfred Lebanon, C.S.A., who had surrendered to an old gunshot wound only a few weeks after Grant met Lee at Appomattox, and whose grave was in a remote cemetery down by the river. The town had developed from a settlement around a frontier trading post, and when the county was laid out it had become the county seat by default of election, since there was then no other town in the new county. The first courthouse had been a log cabin set apart from the town in a public square grandiosely laid out, but it had been torn down one night by two cowhands to settle a bet as to whether a skunk had its den underneath. At any rate the skunk had detracted from the dignity of the law. The second courthouse, which was built ten years later, still stood in the center of the square. It was a three-story structure of golden limestone quarried west of town, with a tin roof and a clock tower that had the highest elevation by several feet of any land for many miles around.

By a sort of intuitive civic zoning, and because stone was plentiful and as cheap as lumber in this country, many buildings on the square also were of limestone, in conformity with the courthouse. On the eastern side, where the western sun slanted its most intense heat, there were three shabby frame structures, but they were partly hidden from view by elm trees which lined the courthouse park, with their huge butts whitewashed to six feet from the ground.

In sixty years Lebanon had not changed. Men and women had died, and failed in business, but the limestone buildings were barely marked by time, with only here and there a loose or crumbling stone. The only symbol of change in Lebanon was the store fronts, as plain to see as grave markers in a cemetery. For as men had died, or failed, and new proprietors had taken over, or new enterprises been started, the old names had been sized over and the new painted in. But the paint had scaled in the successive summers, and had been sandblasted by the wind that swept in from the prairie, so that gradually the lettering underneath had come faintly to appear.

The Alamo Café had been a drug store once, and before that a dry goods store; a drawing of a mortar and pestle could be traced and the word *notions* was discernible. And the Lebanon National Bank was haunted by the ghostly lettering *Bowman Devant & Son, Bankers*. Bowman Devant, Jan's grandfather, had settled a lawsuit with a forty-four in 1897, and although he had been acquitted of a charge of murder, the name of the bank thereafter had been changed. It was the Lebanon National Bank now, and as he drove slowly around the square Cobb saw an automobile stop in front of the limestone building. Jesse Halliday and Ardmore Devant got out of it.

"Sandy," Cobb said. "You and me ought to get smart. It's just nerve and front, that's all he's got. And look at us. We're going off to buy corn whisky."

He turned off on a wide street, bumpy with chug holes, and followed it to a side street where there was a marker: *Persimmon Street*. They came to a white house with green blinds that stood among bois d'arc trees, and Cobb stopped the car beside a white picket fence. Beyond the fence there was a garden, and the zinnias were in bloom. A girl was bending over to pick vegetables that grew among the flowers. She was small, and her figure was full, yet compact and firm. As she stooped, with her back turned to Cobb, she

was as round as a bell. He grinned and called out, "Hello, there."

The girl straightened abruptly and turned. There were a few freckles on her face and her eyes were gray-green. Cobb caught his breath and not for a moment did he recognize her. He remembered her as an awkward girl in blonde pigtails, with rather prominent ears and a penetrating voice.

"I know you," he said. "You're Clara Joplin."

She walked to the fence, with an indolent swaying of her body. She looked closely at Cobb, and when she smiled her mouth widened generously. "Isn't it Cobb Walters? How are you, Cobb?"

He got out of the car and they shook hands, across the picket fence. Her clasp was firm, but immediately she withdrew her hand. Her lips lifted elfinishly at the corners and he remembered that smile, but before he had thought it teasing and altogether objectionable.

"So you've grown up," Cobb said. "Why, I used to wipe your nose."

Her smile lingered, and he stood looking at the easy curve of her lips.

"You used to chase me down the street," she said. "I remember that. It would make you so mad if anybody called you Corncob. And you *were* a corncob then."

Cobb flushed. "I'll chase you again, if you go on."

She lowered her eyes, and he looked at her long, dark lashes contrasting with her blonde hair, and felt a sudden tightness in his throat. His hands gripped the pickets of the fence. Then she looked at him again, with a deliberate lift of her eyelashes. "What are you doing back in Lebanon, Cobb?"

"I've come to stay awhile. I'm going to board with you again, Clara."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid we're full up. We're going to board a drilling crew, you see."

"Sure, but I'm part of that crew. I'll be dressing tools on that rig."

"Really?" Her eyes widened, and sunlight brightened them. "That's swell. We'll have fun." She turned her head and called, "Nora, it's Cobb Walters." She smiled at Cobb. "Give her a minute to get rid of her cigar."

Nora Joplin hurried from the house. She was short, as Clara was, and her head was set on her round shoulders with a minimum of neck. Her hair was white and the skin of her broad face glowed as her daughter's did. "Well, there's my boy," she shouted. "Cobb, damn you, where have you been? What did you stav away so long for?" She reached over the fence to catch nis shoulders. "Boy, give me a hug."

Cobb kissed her cheek and slapped her fat shoulder. "I tell you, Nora, I wouldn't have stayed away so long if I'd known what a dish Clara had growed into. I'd of been back long ago."

"Nora, you're scandalizing the neighbors," Clara said to her mother. "Quit hugging him."

"Now look here, I'm old enough to hug anybody I want to when and where I please." Nora Joplin's laughter rumbled. "Who's that with you?"

"This is Sandy Lake," Cobb said. "He's the driller on that well. Nora, we're going to board here."

"You both need fattening up," Nora said. "Cobb, you were always skinny. Come on in the house."

Sandy brought the suitcases and Cobb took his at the gate. They went into the house and Nora disappeared for a moment, then returned with a short black cigar in her mouth. She led the way upstairs, talking steadily to Cobb. "Oil is certainly going to make a difference in this town. Even if there ain't any oil it will make a difference to me, with all you men to board. It looks like better times for Lebanon.—Mr. Sandy, this here is your room."

She opened a door and disclosed a bright, clean room

with flowered wallpaper and mahogany furniture polished high. And there was a patchwork bedcover with a design of huge, scalloped circles made of bits of bright dressgoods that were a history of Nora's life.

"Cobb, I was never so surprised," Nora said. "This Mr. Halliday walked in one day and asked me to board his men and gave me twenty-five bucks on account and I expected a bunch of roughnecks and up jumps you."

"Cobb," Clara said. "Over here is the room you had back when you were going to high school, only it was mine after that." She opened a door. "Remember?"

Cobb followed her inside and Nora asked, "Sonny, how long does it take to drill a well?"

"Might as well ask me how deep is a well," Cobb said. "I'd say two or three months. In this country you got to go pretty deep. Down to the Ordovician." He was watching Clara as she opened the windows, watching the movements of her firm body.

"Hell, that's fine," Nora said. "Three months is just fine, oil or no oil."

Cobb glanced around him, at the washstand with the white enamel bowl and pitcher, the bird's-eye maple bureau, the steel engraving of Sir Galahad and his white horse that had always been there, and a tinted studio photograph of Clara, with her hair straw-colored and her cheeks an unhealthy rose.

"Lord, I'll take that down," Clara said. "It would give you nightmares."

"No, sir," Cobb said. "I'll keep that."

"Cobb," Nora said. "We own forty acres close by that oil well that we've got rented out. It's part of the block. I guess you know the town got together a block of four thousand acres for Mr. Halliday?"

"The town did?" It was Sandy speaking. He stood in the doorway, with his shrewd eyes watching Nora's face. "They put it in escrow, I bet."

"Hell, I don't know what they did with it." Nora laughed.

"Well, did you get any money off Halliday?"

"A dollar. Everybody got a dollar. Just to make it legal, I suppose."

"There was a town meeting, and, boy, it was something," Clara said. "Ralph Paige wanted everybody to subscribe a percentage of his assessed valuation toward a fund to help the farmers, but it was no go. So Ralph and Ardmere Devant looked around for a way to tighten Lebanon's belt, in a way guaranteed not to bind, and they hit on oil. Some oil man happened to say that rise of land over there looked pretty good for oil, so they got together some leases and persuaded this Mr. Halliday to drill. You know, as soon as they got the rig built there was a pretty good shower and old Abernathy said it was a sign."

"Sign of a water well, mostly likely," Cobb said.

"Clara, let's give 'em a chance to get settled," Nora said. "Don't hang around and pester Cobb the way you always did."

Cobb followed Clara into the hall and said softly, "I'm going to have lots of free time, but I suppose you're a pretty popular girl."

"Enough so I won't have to ask any favors of you, Cobb."

"Now, say!"

She smiled. "Cobb, you couldn't fool anybody. Everything you're thinking sticks out all over your homely face."

Cobb watched her go down the stairs with Nora, then turned back into his room. Sandy was sitting in a chair by the window.

"Well, here we are," Cobb said. "It's working out pretty good."

"Cobb, he got it all for nothing," Sandy said.

"What's that, old-timer?"

"That block of leases. He got it for nothing." Sandy

took a plug of tobacco from his pocket and cut a chew. "The way they do it, Cobb, is to pay a dollar to every owner in the block and put the leases in escrow in the bank."

"I don't care how he got it," Cobb said. "He got it."

"He got it fer nothing. The idea is that as soon as he spuds in a well the bank, as trustee under the escrow agreement, is obliged to hand over the leases. Then I guess he can sell some of them off for cash if he wants to. Or sell an interest in the well. Or syndicate the whole damned thing."

"You looking for something to worry about? Say, you don't know when you're well off. You got plenty to eat and a nice room to sleep in and a pretty widow woman to feed you. What more do you want?"

"She's a right sweet old lady, sure enough," Sandy said. "But she talks like an oil driller."

Cobb smiled. "Nora's a character. Her husband ran cattle out west and she helped with the chuck wagon. She learned to drink and smoke and swear and play poker and she learned to cook, too."

"She's got one hell of a daughter," Sandy said.

"I'll look after the daughter. You look after the widow woman, Sandy."

Sandy grinned and spat tobacco juice out the window. "Maybe I will at that."

"Now ain't it nice?" Cobb sat down on the bed. "Ain't it worked out nice? And, Sandy, maybe we'll make a well and get that two thousand in oil. It's a sweet elevation they got out there."

Sandy spat again. "You go ahead and take care of the widow woman's daughter and the optimism, Cobb, and I'll take care of the widow woman and the pessimism that goes with her." He stood up. "How about we get us some of that corn you talked about?"

"Let's go, then."

They went downstairs together, and found Clara sitting in a swing on the porch. Cobb grinned at her. "I've sort of forgot my way around. We want to go down on the river and buy a little whisky."

She nodded. "You know old Jack Vibart, the Alsatian?"

"Sure, I remember him."

"I guess he still sells it. He always has."

"That's all we wanted to know. Thanks."

"Say." Sandy smiled. "Why don't you come along?"

Clara glanced over her shoulder toward the house, then got quickly to her feet. Cobb's mouth opened slightly as she came up to him. "Are you coming?"

"Why not, Cobb? Are you still thinking of me as a little girl in pigtails?"

"Maybe I was."

She laughed, and as they walked toward the car her smile was teasing. "Cobb, are you still so conventional? You don't approve, do you?"

"I didn't say that. I guess you're Nora's daughter and that's the way it ought to be. I'm glad to see there's a little life in Lebanon."

"There's plenty of life in me," the girl said, and got in the car. "Maybe too much for a schoolteacher."

"You teach school?" Cobb was surprised.

"I did last year, but I've had about enough of it."

Cobb followed her directions. They drove out of town and turned off on a side road that led toward the river. After they had traveled a quarter of a mile a roof came to view on the right. They turned a bend and Cobb stopped in front of Vibart's house.

"Honk the horn," Clara said. "He'll come out."

"You seem to know your way around," Cobb said.

"Oh, stop it, Cobb." She frowned. "Of course I do."

He sounded the horn, and almost instantly the door of the farmhouse opened and an old man came out. His over-

alls were held in place by a single strap and his shirt was ragged but clean.

"Hello there, Jack," Clara said. "Remember Cobb Walters?"

Vibart bent his head and looked at Cobb. "I heard already. You're drilling dat vell, ain't you?"

"News sure travels," Cobb said.

"You reckon you find oil down yonder?"

"May be."

"You ought to," Vibart said. "Dere ought to be some-ting down below. Sure ain't not'ing on top."

Sandy chuckled. "I've drilled at Seminole and Burkburnett and Cushing and in plenty of wildcat territory and I've never sunk a hole where somebody didn't say that. I never knew it to fail."

"There's a reason for it," Cobb said. "Got a gallon jug, Jack?"

"Just set in de car. I fetch it."

"The reason is that when you've got a pool of oil down below it sometimes happens that some of it escapes and those hydrocarbons seep up to the surface along with sulphur and they raise hell with the vegetation," Cobb said. "That's one reason for it."

Jack Vibart returned with a glass jug full of yellow whisky. "Account of de dry vedder my corn crop about burn up. Price is high, Cobb. Dat vill be t'ree dolla."

Cobb found three greasy bills, nearly all he had left, and paid for the whisky. Then he drove on, in sandy ruts parallel to the river. They came to a grassy clearing and he turned in among the trees. "Let's go sit where it's cool."

"You know, I think I ought to go home," Clara said uncertainly. "Nora doesn't even know where I am."

"Now who's conventional?" Cobb said. "Come on, Clara.—Sandy, bring that jug."

"Well, I guess," Sandy said.

The girl was silent as they followed a cowpath through

the brush and came out on a sloping bank of red clay. They sat in the grass at the top of the claybank, under a post oak tree, and Sandy uncorked the jug. He offered it to Cobb.

"Ladies first," Cobb said, and grinned.

Clara glanced at him, and her eyes shone angrily. "No, thank you."

"Oh, come on," Sandy said. "Have a snort of it."

She shook her head, and gazed at a bar of red sand across the river. Sandy shrugged, and passed the jug to Cobb. He held it poised. "Say, Clara, I thought you had a taste for corn."

"Well, I don't just up-end a jug, Cobb. I don't drink that way."

"Oh," Cobb said, and winked at Sandy. "Sorry we ain't got a glass and some ice." He took a drink and gave the jug to Sandy, then leaned back on his elbow.

Sandy looked down at them, smiled, and turned away. He carried the jug down to the edge of the water, where the red sand seemed hard but became like mush underfoot within a few seconds. He sat on a drift log and looked at the slow red river.

"You certainly know how to take the fun out of anything, Cobb," Clara said. "Do you have to act like a big brother?"

"I'm sorry," Cobb said. "Maybe it's because I'm kind of mixed up today. I'll tell you why." He turned on his stomach and plucked a blade of grass to chew. "I've been away for five years, Clara, and I came home yesterday evening. You know what I found? I found that my folks have got to move off their farm."

She sat up and looked at him. "Why is that?"

"After nearly thirty-five years," Cobb said. "You see, Dad ain't been doing well, and he's old, and he's no help to Ardmore Devant in his ranch work any more. So it ain't convenient for the Lebanon National Bank to go on carrying Dad's load of debts and he just has to sell the place and

move off. He ain't farming for himself. He's farming for the bank, and even if he makes a crop of cotton he owes it all, and more, to the bank."

"Can't he get a mortgage or something?"

"That farm is his homestead. You know the law in Texas. You can't foreclose a mortgage on a man's homestead, except for the purchase debt, or taxes, or improvement liens, so he couldn't ever get a mortgage."

"Oh, well," the girl said. "Cobb, maybe you'll find oil."

"It could be, but only one wildcat in seventeen hits the pay. Sixteen to one is high odds."

In the heat they did not see the countryside as a landscape; the sun was too bright. They saw it in distinct and individual detail; a tree there, here a stalk of squaw weed, a nettle with its leaves bright against the claybank, a plum bush huddled to the ground. Clara lay back, with her head on her clasped hands, and looked up at the hot sky. "Cobb, if we strike oil I'm going to travel. I'm going to New York. Have you ever been there?"

"The only places I've ever been are just in the Mid-Continent field, just in Texas and Oklahoma and Arkansas. But I don't know that I'd want to go to New York. I don't like rich places. Tulsa, Oklahoma, is the only rich town I know and I don't like it. People got more money there than is good for them. Some people. Some just starve."

"But they say the houses are beautiful."

"They spend a lot of money on 'em, all right. Two and three hundred thousand dollars, just for a house to live in and grass to walk around on. That town is just too big for its britches."

Her lips curved in the easy, indolent smile that made Cobb's heart beat faster. "That's better than not having any britches, like Lebanon," she said.

"Yes, it's sure this town ain't rich. But still, it would be sort of too bad if we made an oil well. I've seen booms before, and it's never the same again. Lebanon would never

be the same. I was at Borger, in the Panhandle, and I was at Seminole and I saw it all. . . . You see a light in a man's eye that makes you wonder if you can ever civilize the human race."

"You and I are different there, Cobb. You want things to stay the same, but I want change. I want it to be different. I don't want to go on teaching school in some little town with a windmill in the middle of the main street." She touched his hand lightly. "You see, I want to go places and have fun. I don't want to shrivel up like corn in the south wind."

Cobb got to his feet without speaking. He walked down the claybank and picked up the jug. He carried it to Clara and smiled down at her. "Let's take a drink on that and forget the rest. How about it, honey? Man to man?"

"Man to man, Cobb." She took the jug and hooked her thumb in the handle. She let the body of it lie along her forearm like a fieldhand with a water jug, and Cobb thought of Dolly Goback in the field when he had worked with the thresher crew. Dolly had a freckled arm as strong as a man's and her face was the gray color of a toad. He gazed at Clara's light hair and clear skin, and chuckled as she choked on the warm liquor. She had taken only a sip.

"Friends again?" he asked.

"Friends." She crossed her fingers. He sat down beside her and she said, "Cobb, tell me something. How do you know if there's oil or not?"

"You don't know until you get down there and it smears you so black and greasy the imps of hell wouldn't speak to you."

"Then how do you know where to drill?"

"Oh, it's kind of complicated. Geology and all that."

"Tell me, Cobb. Maybe I won't understand it all, but I want to know."

"Well, two or three times this country has been under water and the oil is in the sand of those old-time seas.

Around here the sand of the Cretaceous sea is exposed on the surface and that's why you see so many fossils. But the sand where the oil would come from would have to be a sea from a long time farther back, in the Ordovician System, and so far there ain't been an Ordovician test in this section. You see, the oil collects in a big pool down there, and geologists can look at rocks and outcrops and tell you whether there's a formation. It collects in a sort of dome, you see."

"Yes."

"It's complicated, Clara, and hell, I told you I was ignorant. And anyhow, geology can only tell you if oil is indicated. The rest is luck, and maybe my luck will turn. I got a little medicine man an Indian I knew in Oklahoma give to me and he swore it would bring me luck."

"May I see it?"

Cobb took the medicine man from his pocket and she held it in her two hands.

"It done old John Redbird some good," Cobb said. "He didn't have a thing in the world and he struck oil and he took God only knows how much of it out of the ground and he's built himself a big brick house on his allotment, in among the rigs." Cobb chuckled. "And you just can't beat him at knock rummy."

"Then we'll just have to put this medicine man to work, Cobb. He can help us all."

"He's doing all right. He found you for me, Clara, and say, you sure have growed into something. You're as pretty as a prairie flower."

"Cobb, you said man to man."

"All right, man to man. Where's that jug?" He uncorked the jug and offered it to her, but she shook her head. Cobb smiled. "But damn it, honey, you are beautiful. I always had a weakness for blondes."

"I guess my beauty came out of that jug. All of a sudden."

Cobb took a deep drink. His face was warm and perspiration stood out on his forehead. He was still smiling. "Let's us leave that old river rat down there. Let's you and me go off with the jug."

She got quickly to her feet. "Let's you and me go back to town!" Her face was flushed and the sprinkle of freckles showed darkly.

"Now, say . . ."

"Well, I'm going."

"But I didn't mean anything. Hell, you've had me wrong all day."

"Oh, no, I haven't. Except that, yes, maybe I have. Yes, I guess I did have you wrong. I guess I was just a little bit sentimental about you."

Cobb sighed, and saw that she was smiling at him, an aloof smile that angered him.

"Cobb, I believe you should have been a preacher," she said quietly.

"Now what are you talking about?"

"You've got a preacher's sense of sin," she said. "You've got a preacher's sense of morals. It's black and white to you, except that you're always looking for the black."

Cobb grinned. "Maybe now we do understand each other, because I'm after you and I'm going to get you."

Her eyes suddenly were veiled, and her lips moved slightly. Cobb did not know whether or not she was angry and he said, "Man to man, Clara, that's the way I feel about you and you'd better watch out for me."

Her eyes opened fully and she smiled. "As a matter of fact, Cobb, I don't think you're so very dangerous." She laughed lightly and turned back along the cowpath.

Sandy came scrambling up the claybank. "Let's have the jug, Cobb. Say, you don't give nobody else a chance."

Cobb gave up the jug and followed the path among the trees. He found Clara waiting in the car. She glanced at him with a twist of her lips that was not quite a smile, and

she was silent as they drove back to Lebanon. When they turned into Persimmon Street Cobb chuckled and said, "Well, it's been quite a home-coming. It sure has. I'm glad I'm back again."

"We all are, Cobb," Clara said. "As soon as you get used to the climate everything will be fine."

When Cobb stopped the car under the bois d'arc trees Clara went quickly to the house and he watched her go. This girl had set him thinking, and as he went upstairs with Sandy he asked, "What do you know about oil geology?"

Sandy sniffed. "Them rock hounds. They don't know nothing. It's all guesswork."

"I remember you used to have a book on it."

"Yeah, a rock hound I knew wrote it down and gave it to me. I never opened it, though."

"You still got it?"

"Yeah, in my bag somewhere."

"I'd like to take a look at it."

"It'll do you no good."

"I'd like to see it, though."

Cobb followed Sandy into his room and waited while Sandy rummaged in his suitcase and brought out a small, black-bound book. The title of it was *A Guide to Petroleum Geology*. Cobb carried it to his room, and after dinner that night, while Sandy and Nora Joplin played knock rummy downstairs with Bill Kaufman and Joe Rogers, he sat by the table lamp in his room, reading the book.

5

THE rig stood ready to bore for oil at Lebanon, a huge sundial to mark the hour of noon. Cobb waited on the derrick floor, looking down at the men and women crowded around the slush pit, perched on the rock wall. He had fired the boiler, and steam was up. He had oiled the machinery to drill this hole into the earth, in search of treasure that men had passed by for centuries.

In all the time of man there had been oil. Thousands of years before Christ flood waters had swept down the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates and Noah had heard the command: "Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch." Moses in the bulrushes was made secure by pitch, and the bricks of the Tower of Babel were mortared with it. They were using the products of petroleum then, and there was an oil business then.

Oil seeped up through the ground and was burned in the lamps of Agrigentum before the days of the Roman Empire. Pliny the Elder prescribed it for leprosy, bleeding, gout, diarrhea, rheumatism and shortness of breath, and for toothache and the straightening of eyelashes. The Romans burned Oil of Agrigentum in their lamps, drank it for epilepsy and colic, daubed it for ringworm and blindness, and the patrician women shaped their eyebrows with oil and carried small vials of petroleum for smelling salts.

There came a demand for oil, and pits were dug near oil springs and the oil was skimmed from the surface as the pits filled. Marco Polo saw oil so gathered at the oil springs

of Baku seven centuries before the October Revolution, and it was recovered thus in Tibet and by the Indians of North and South America.

In Texas the survivors of the De Soto expedition found pitch to calk the boats that took them back to Mexico, and the Tejas Indians went to the sour springs of oil for cures. The northern Indians of America gathered oil from the springs of New York and Pennsylvania to treat, as the patients of Pliny had, rheumatism, coughs, burns and toothache. It came to be known as Seneca Oil, and marching troops of the Revolution bathed their aching joints in the ancient pits dug by Seneca Indians to obtain the oil. They drank it as a purge.

Wells had been dug for centuries, for water and for salt, and often such wells had been spoiled by rainbows of oil. As men moved westward in America there was need for salt to dress their meat and hides. Pioneers searched out the salt springs and the salt licks, and salt works were profitable in that western country.

Two brothers dug for salt brine at the Great Buffalo Lick near Charleston, West Virginia, in the fall of 1807; Joseph Ruffner and his brother, David. The bedrock was overlain by gravel and slime in which no hole would stand, but these men were engineers. They cut down a hollow sycamore tree more than four feet in diameter and propped it upright and dug by turns inside the tree and hoisted up the ooze inside the tree and out in a whisky keg, forcing the tree down as they dug. When they reached bedrock, with seventeen feet of slime cased off, they devised a means of drilling through the rock. They made a two-inch chisel fast to an iron drill and raised and lowered it with a rope for a drilling cable and a spring pole to lash the chisel against the rock. By January 15, 1808, they had penetrated the rock to a depth of forty feet and had struck a stream of brine.

Fifty years later, when whales were scarce and men had

begun to consider the possibilities of petroleum for lubrication and illumination instead of horse medicine, the Seneca Oil Company was formed to drill among the oil springs of Pennsylvania and Col. E. L. Drake employed a crew of salt well drillers to work that first well drilled for oil; Uncle Billy Smith and his two sons. Their method was that of the Ruffner brothers, their implements iron and steel instead of a sycamore tree and a chisel. By the twenty-eighth of August, 1859, they had drilled to a depth of sixty-nine and one-half feet, and the next morning the hole was nearly full of oil. The phrase "struck oil" came into the language.

As the Ruffner brothers had drilled their salt well at Buffalo Lick with a steel chisel and a hollow sycamore tree for casing, so two tons of steel stood ready to pulverize the subterranean rock at Lebanon, and steel casing was laid out on the racks, built level with the rig floor. Instead of a spring pole there was a forty horsepower engine and an old steam cotton gin boiler to drive it, while a tubular bailer instead of a whisky keg would remove the cuttings.

The derrick stood on the tableland, eighty-four feet high, the cable was wound on the bull wheel shaft, the string of tools had been made up and stood ready for use, with a huge spudding bit to make the first hole, and steam was up.

There were a thousand people from the town at the Abernathy lease that noon to see the well spudded in. Ardmore Devant was there, with the leases in his pocket. Jesse Halliday was there, nervously watching, and Cobb saw Rob Witter, the lumberman whose lumber had built the rig; Anson North, whose fuel fired the boiler, and Nora Joplin, whose table would feed that least but most important unit of the operation, the drilling crew.

First there had been a basket picnic, and people sat on the rock fence to eat, and scattered papers to blow in the tall grass and catch on the barbs of mesquite along the

fence. They crowded around the derrick to ask questions. They looked at the hole in the center of the rig floor, through which the pounding tools would drill, down through the shale and the sand and rock and water to the reservoir of oil below, no one knew how deep. If there was a pool of oil.

Clara Joplin sat with Cobb on the lazy bench, her eyes green and hazel in the sunlight, her smile eager as she talked. "I guess this is the most exciting day in Lebanon since the first train ran on the Nancy Hanks."

"Better save that excitement until we drill a well," Cobb said. He had on his work clothes, dungarees stiff with grease, a pair of old, cracked shoes, and his soiled white hat on the back of his head.

"Tell me about it, Cobb." She put her hand on the great arc of a wheel. "What's this tremendous thing?"

"That's called the bull wheel. The drill cable is wound on its shaft and we use it to pull the tools up out of the hole and let 'em down again. Over yonder is the string of tools. Altogether, with the bit and the drill stem and the jars the string is forty feet long and weighs better than two tons. That's what we drill the hole with, but we can't use it until we've got some hole to put it in, so we start out with the spudder. There it is, that big lump of rust."

Cobb pointed out a huge bit, fifteen inches in diameter, which was suspended inside the derrick. "We got a rope attached to that bit and we drill the first fifty feet or so with it. Come over here."

He led her along the walkway beside the belt house and pointed out the huge metal crank on the band wheel. "The object of drilling is to lift up the tools and lash them down again. That big balanced timber up there, called the walking beam, does the lifting, and the turn of this crank makes the walking beam go up and down. The drill line is hitched onto that thing called the temper screw, hanging down from the tip of the walking beam. When you're drilling

you let the screw out to lower the tools in the hole, and that's all there is to it, except that you got to run casing when you hit water or when the hole is cavy, and you got to pull the tools to bail out the cuttings and dress the bit when it gets dull."

It was very hot and dust had been raised by many feet. Loose papers fluttered in a random wind. Ralph Paige, as president of the Chamber of Commerce, went to the edge of the rig floor to call for order, and near him Cobb saw a slender girl who moved quickly, like a young goat. She was Ralph Paige's daughter, Nancy Jo Paige. She glanced at Cobb with a quick smile of recognition and lifted one hand lightly. She was too thin, Cobb thought, but she had long, round legs and hips that were more than lumps of flesh.

Ralph Paige introduced Ardmore Devant, and as the banker began a speech Cobb saw Jan on the walkway, approaching him. She was wearing jodhpurs again, and a blue silk shirt with white piping. She walked slowly, and the close fit of her jodhpurs made her figure even more feminine.

"Cobb, did Father tell you he wants you to come in and see him?"

"Yes, he said he wanted to have a talk. Why?"

"He thinks maybe something can be worked out.—Cobb, he's really quite upset. Please understand that. Why don't you stop in the bank in the morning? He expects you."

Cobb faced her. "Sure, I'll go in and see him. I want to help my folks any way I can."

"So do I, Cobb. Why, Lord, they helped raise me up."

Cobb smiled and turned away. He stepped down from the walkway and went toward the boiler. Ardmore Devant had finished his speech and the next speaker was a big, friendly man in a nearly white Stetson hat. His name was Joe Williams and he had been sheriff of Lebanon County for so long that his campaigns were a formality. Yet pri-

mary day was only two weeks away and here was a crowd of one thousand voters and the opportunity to announce once more his candidacy for re-election. He did so briefly, told a story, and sat down.

Cobb drew in his breath suddenly. Standing by a mesquite tree, not far from Abernathy's shack, was a man in a dusty black hat, holding the reins of a gaunt sorrel horse. Cobb recognized the stoop of the round shoulders. He walked quickly toward the mesquite tree. "Dad, what are you doing out here?"

Tom Walters smiled. "I rode over to see what was going on, son."

"Sure, but why didn't you come on up to the rig?"

"I didn't want to get in the way, Cobb."

"Why, hell," Cobb said, and put his hand on his father's shoulder. "Oh, hell."

"It sure is something," Tom Walters said. "I ain't seen a crowd like this here since the Run. Who's that talking now?"

Cobb turned his head. "That's my boss. Jesse Halliday is his name."

"We're all together in drilling this here well," Halliday was saying in a voice as smooth as the oil he sought. "I want everybody to feel it's your well just as much as it is mine. If we strike oil we'll all be rich, and I believe we're going to strike it. But of course this is a wildcat well. We don't know. Maybe we'll have some trying days ahead of us, but we're going to continue on together, fighting our way through, and all I ask of you people is your co-operation. Let's put this thing through together and let's all get rich, together."

"Dad, we're about ready to spud in," Cobb said. "Come on over to the rig with me."

"I believe I'll stay here, Cobb. This here sorrel would jerk hisself loose if I tied him up."

Cobb looked at the drooping ears of the sorrel horse. "He don't look like he could jerk a blade of grass."

"Still, I believe I'll just stay here and hold him. But you go on about your business, Cobb. I guess they need you over yonder."

"Yes, I better go."

"This sure is something," Tom Walters said.

At the rig a thin young man waved a sheaf of notepaper and smiled at Cobb. They had known each other in high school. They had played ball together, smoked secret cigarettes together, drunk corn whisky down on the river.

"I was trying to catch your eye before, Cobb," Ed Drum said. He wore spectacles and the thick lenses distorted the shapes of his eyes.

"What are you up to now, Ed?"

"I'm on the *Lebanon News*, working with my mother. Cobb, why haven't you been around to see us? Sweetie was talking this morning about how you used to deliver the paper on your bicycle."

"I only got to town yesterday." Cobb smiled. "What's new with you, Ed? You married yet?"

Ed shook his head and glanced across at the slim girl sitting on the lazy bench. "So it's still Nancy Jo Paige?" Cobb asked.

"Yes, it still is."

Jesse Halliday touched Cobb's arm and drew him aside. "Soon as she's spudded in I got to go to Wichita Falls for a few days. I want you boys to make all the hole you can while I'm gone. I'll be back in about a week."

Cobb nodded, and Halliday went to the other side of the rig, where Ardmore Devant stood. Cobb saw the banker take a manila envelope from his pocket, and he knew that it contained the leases on four thousand acres of land covering the general elevation on which the rig stood. Sandy had seen it also, and he gave Cobb a slight, affirmative nod. The muscles of Cobb's jaw tightened.

A man's a fool just to work, he thought. There's nothing in it. You got to use your eyes and your ears and your head. You got to be smart. That guy's as poor as I am, but he's got front and silk shirts and an expensive car that he sure must owe the finance company for. And he got that block of leases for next to nothing and his tools are second-hand and he owes for the lumber for the rig and the fuel for the boiler. The same people who gave him that block of leases free are going to pay for this test before they're through and never know they done it.

Cobb became aware of an expectant silence. Jesse Halliday stepped forward and raised both hands, then turned toward Sandy Lake. "Mr. Lake, how is your steam?"

"Steam is up," Sandy said in a nervous voice.

"Then spud her in," Halliday shouted.

There was a cheer, and the crowd pressed nearer the derrick, watching as Sandy turned the telegraph wheel. The engine roared, the belt moved, the band wheel turned, and the crank began its steady motion. Up and down went the drill rope and the spudder crashed for the first time into the prairie soil. There was a puff of dust.

Sandy stood just over the hole, steadying the line and slowly revolving the bit as it pounded into the soft earth. Clara looked at Cobb and asked, "Is that all there is to it?"

"She's spudded in," Cobb said.

The Jesse Halliday-Abernathy No. 1 was spudded in. Tens of thousands of wells had been drilled since the Ruffner brothers drove their hollow sycamore tree into the ooze at Great Buffalo Lick. Millions of barrels of oil had flowed to the surface. Millions of gallons of gasoline had driven countless automobiles, trucks, tractors, tanks, airplanes. Hundreds of oil fields had been discovered throughout the world by the American method, the method of the Ruffner brothers, with American drillers in Russia, where Marco Polo had seen the oil springs; in South America, where for two centuries petroleum had glazed the

interior of aguardiente jars; in the Near East, where Herodotus had watched the walls of Babylon mortared with asphaltum.

Thousands of wells had been dry, and now another wildcat. The Halliday-Abernathy No. 1. Started in the hope of tapping oil that had accumulated beneath the surface of the earth for countless generations, for millions of years, to bring it up and convert it into gasoline for automobiles and tanks, fuel oil for diesel engines, for ocean liners; kerosene for lamps; oil for dyes and lipsticks, soaps and medicines, for hair tonics, headache tablets, for rayons, oiled paper, printing inks, paraffin, shampoos, cosmetics. For a thousand uses and a thousand yet to come. The Halliday-Abernathy No. 1. Named for a simple old Negro who owned the surface crust above the reservoir of ages. On that midsummer day the Abernathy well was spudded in; one more wildcat to take its place among the statistics which showed that sixteen out of seventeen were dry.

6

FROM noon to midnight. Day after day, from noon to midnight, and the hours and the minutes pound their way like the drill in the earth below. That first night Cobb was tired and he slept the next morning until after nine o'clock. He was awakened by the noise of a broom in the hall outside his room.

It was Clara sweeping the hall. When he opened his bedroom door Cobb saw her in a shaft of hard sunlight from the window. She wore a thin printed dress and it was obvious that there was little under it. Cobb gazed at the molding of her breasts, defined as she straightened, the strong thrust of her thighs and the full curve of her hips. There was an elastic vitality about her.

She saw him and asked, "Hungry, Cobb?"

"Sort of."

"The coffee is waiting. I'll go down and fix you something."

Cobb still watched her. "You chief cook around here?"

"I am until school takes up, at least. How far did you drill last night?"

He smiled. "Am I going to have to answer that question every morning for the next two or three months?"

"You sure are."

"We did all right. We'll run the drill string today and really pound our way down yonder."

Cobb went down to breakfast. The dining room was on the north side of the house and from the window he could look out toward the town square through the leaves of a

bois d'arc tree. The branches hung heavy under the weight of the pithy green fruit, and the pear-shaped leaves framed the clock tower of the courthouse in the distance and the spire of the Methodist church, as white as starch. Off to the left on rising ground was the red brick high school that Cobb had attended.

They had big hopes when they sent me off to school, he thought. Dad never had an education and Mom learned her reading out of the Bible. He wanted me to sell in the dry goods store, I guess because of that store he kept in Montezuma, Kansas, but Mom wanted me to come back to the farm. Cotton was a better cash crop in those days, before the depression, and they scraped up enough to buy me a suit of clothes with my first vest and some shoes and they brought me to town in the wagon. It cost ten dollars a month to board me, and that money was hard come by. And I never gave them nothing in return. Now when they need me I got nothing. Only a dollar a day and a promise. Not even a silver dollar for old Abernathy.

"Cobb, you want your eggs up or over?" Clara called from the kitchen.

"Up," Cobb said, and smiled, remembering Clara in the days when he had been in high school.

She was a little tomboy then, he thought. She'd holler at me and wart me near to death and I guess she picked on me because I was kind of country and trying not to show it and when she'd yell corncob at me it would make me mad. And I was corncob, sure enough. Nora taught me some, and I quit tucking my napkin in my collar and I quit shoveling with my knife and before that year was over I was using hair oil and saying excuse me and walking with my head up instead of my eyes on a plowshare.

"Cobb, I want you-all to hurry things up," Clara said. She put a plate of bacon and eggs in front of him. "I want you to strike that oil before school takes up, because if you

do I'm not going to stay in Lebanon. No, sir, no more teaching school for me."

"I thought you liked it, Clara."

"Oh, I don't hate it. And some of it is fun." Her eyes lingered on his face. "Cobb, I'd have liked to teach you when you were a boy. I bet you were cute."

"I was just dumb," Cobb said. "I never got good marks and I was always up to hell."

She smiled, and sat down across the table from him. "Cobb, there's one thing I wish you wouldn't do so much," she said seriously. "I wish you wouldn't always run yourself down."

"Run myself down?"

"You do, Cobb. You say you're dumb. You say you're ignorant. You say you'll never amount to anything. You don't think that."

"I've come to see it's true, that's all."

"I don't believe that. You simply put obstacles in the way of yourself. You can feel something inside you that wants to urge you on and you try to stop it. Isn't that right?"

"What do you teach at school? Psychology?"

She blushed. "But isn't that a fact, Cobb?"

"No, it ain't. There's nothing inside me but a stomach that wants to be fed." He got up abruptly and walked out to his car.

As he drove downtown Cobb thought that there were too few towns like Lebanon remaining, with the spacious square, the peaceful tempo. In many courthouse square towns the old courthouses were coming down to be replaced by modern buildings of Portland cement like ice cakes on the prairie. In Lebanon the pavement was worn and full of chug holes, but Cobb would not have it otherwise. The paint had scaled from many of the signs, but he like it so.

But there was a quality not the quality of age that puzzled him as he slowly circled the square, and it was not

until he parked in front of the Lebanon National Bank that he was able to identify it. For the first time in his memory there was a vacant store on the square. Ned Barstow's drug store had closed its doors, but the show windows remained filled with merchandise. It was typical of Ralph Paige, and probably Ralph had persuaded the two competing druggists to provide the display, so that there would be no empty windows on the square, Cobb thought. As he got out of his car he saw Ned Barstow standing in the doorway of the Collins Pharmacy wearing the linen coat of his calling, and looking across at his name lettered on a wooden sign on which *Jenkins Hardware* was faintly visible.

Cobb entered the bank slowly, and the first person he recognized was Pruitt Devant, who was looking with a doleful air through the bars of a teller's cage. When he saw Cobb his mouth twisted to one side in a grin that Cobb remembered well. Pruitt had hair as black as Jan's and the same soft dark eyes that his sister had. He was handsome, but his full mouth was not strong and his lips were too red, Cobb thought as he went forward. Their meeting was casual.

"Jan told me you were working on that well," Pruitt said. "I couldn't get out to see you spud in." Because of the bronze bars between them they did not need to shake hands.

"I came in to talk to your father," Cobb said.

Pruitt glanced over his shoulder. "Well, I'll see if he can spare the time."

Cobb watched him go, his face flushed because of the tone Pruitt had used. Pruitt had lost none of his arrogance as far as Cobb was concerned, and he kept Cobb waiting a long time. When he returned he said casually, "He'll see you now."

Cobb walked to a door at the back, which opened into Ardmore Devant's office, facing his desk. On one side of the office two large, barred windows gave on the street;

on the other side there was a blank wall and beyond the wall the bank's safes were set in concrete. Ardmore's chair was comfortably near the wall and the vault beyond, and by leaving the door of his office slightly ajar he could see into the bank and could inspect whoever approached the grilled entrance of the vault.

Ardmore waved one hand in a greeting that Cobb thought was over-cordial, but he did not rise from his swivel chair. Cobb sat down and looked across the desk into the banker's small, speculative eyes. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Devant?"

"Yes, Cobb." Ardmore picked up an arrowhead that was one of his collection and toyed with it. "You've been away, in the oil fields, and I don't know whether you realize what's happened to the cattle market, but it's gone to H. It's absolutely gone to H." He glanced over his shoulder at the starch-white spire of the Methodist church. "I wouldn't want to have the preacher hear me say that, but it sums it up, Cobb."

Cobb moved his shoulders stiffly. He kept watching Ardmore's face.

"I'd hate to tell you how much money I lost on that ranch last year," Ardmore said. "But I'll admit it was considerable, and I just can't afford it. I've got to cut down to the bone out there. I've got to run that ranch for profit, Cobb, and that means no more slipshod methods."

"I never knew you to be slipshod, Mr. Devant," Cobb said evenly.

"Eh? Well, I guess not." Ardmore's laugh was self-conscious. "That's not exactly my point, Cobb. Now listen, my boy, you know I'm not a hard man. I try to be fair in all my dealings. But you know, and your father told me so himself, that he's just too old for the ranch work. It's all he can do to attend to his crops, and it takes a vigorous man to handle cattle and horses."

"He's still a good farmer," Cobb said. "And he can pass fences and haul your feed."

"But I had to put a couple of cowhands in there to run that ranch right, Cobb, and frankly, your father doesn't fit into the picture. And I'm sure you understand that, with me deprived of your father's services and your father deprived of that extra income, his standing here at the bank is affected. Cobb, we simply cannot continue to renew your father's notes and extend his credits. It's not good business for the bank, and it's not good business for your father. The best thing in the world for him, my boy, is to sell that property, and I think that thirty dollars an acre is a mighty fair price for it, in these times. Especially when you consider that it's not much good to anybody else, surrounded as it is by my ranch."

Cobb drew in a deep breath. "Mr. Devant, my folks have worked that land for thirty-three years. My father settled on it after he was burned out of the Cherokee Strip. He holds the original patent on it."

"I appreciate all that." Ardmore put the arrowhead down and looked at it. "I haven't been able to sleep at night because of it, I assure you. But I don't see any other way for your father to meet his obligations, and thirty dollars an acre is a good price. Now I've been thinking about it, and Jan and me put our heads together, and we had the idea your folks might like to take over a little farm of mine west of town. It's a good forty-acre piece and I think they'd like it fine."

"I don't believe I know the place," Cobb said.

"It just came into my hands. The feller out there financed the purchase of it through the bank, but he couldn't make it go and we had to foreclose and I bought it at the sale. But it's a fine farm. The trouble with this feller is he was just plain extravagant. He had an old car and he was always running into town in it, just burning up gasoline. He didn't think anything of leaving off his

plowing to ride to town, and he couldn't even wait for Saturday, and he laid out money for new henhouses and a battery radio set for his wife. He spent away his farm, Cobb, that's what he did."

"What's his name?" Cobb asked.

"Simmons. Arthur Simmons. You know him?"

"No, I don't," Cobb said. "What's he going to do with himself?"

"His boy has a job at Anson North's garage. They'll make out all right, and at any rate they're going to have to move off, whether your folks take the place or not."

"My folks wouldn't want to take another man's home," Cobb said.

"But they wouldn't be, Cobb. You have my word on that. I tell you, this feller just won't stay on as a tenant. You know, Cobb, he has that false pride. He just won't do it."

"I see," Cobb said. "Just what is your proposition, Mr. Devant?"

"Well, I'll take over your father's farm at thirty dollars an acre and he can pay up what he owes here at the bank. It comes to about two thousand dollars, so that will leave him twenty-eight hundred clear. Now he can take that money and buy the Simmons place on easy terms and at the same price per acre, or he can take it over on a renter basis, whichever he wants to do."

"Well, all right," Cobb said, and stood up. He wanted to get away as quickly as he could. "I'll talk it over with my folks, but I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Devant, my father will want to reserve the mineral rights."

"Now wait up, Cobb. That would affect the price of that farm."

"We just might strike oil there," Cobb said. "And I guess Dad can find another buyer if he has to."

Ardmore frowned. "Suppose we leave all that until later, and possibly we can compromise on one-half the mineral

rights. Suppose you put that proposition up to your father, Cobb."

"Yes, I will."

"Good." Ardmore also stood up. "Cobb, I want you to stop in and see me every now and then. I want all the news about that well. I want the inside on it, Cobb."

"I don't know a thing," Cobb said.

Ardmore laughed. "You don't need to be discreet with me, my boy. I have an interest in that well. I made a small loan to Mr. Halliday in return for an interest in the well."

"Bankers think of everything," Cobb said. "Giving a mortgage on a hole in the ground. How you going to fore-close on that?"

Ardmore scratched his chin. "I'm not interested in the hole, Cobb, only in the bottom of it. I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me the inside of how things go."

"Well, all right," Cobb said.

Cobb drove at once to Fossil Creek, along past the bluff and the limestone outcrop and up the rise of ground to his father's house under the pecan trees. He had helped to bud in these trees, and he remembered the summer when they had done the work. The previous year they had sawed off branches to shape the trees, which were strong native stock with thick-shelled nuts of a very sweet meat. They had budded in the papershell variety. First they had made slits in the bark of the branches, then inserted the peeled twigs, on which the buds were, into the slits, and made patches of beeswax and paraffin. And thereafter the shells had been thinner and the nuts larger, but still the meat was sweet.

This day it was bare and hot even under the pecan trees, and a burning wind blew in their faces as he sat on the porch with his parents and told them of Ardmore Devant's offer.

"There's just one thing about it," Cobb said. "We're going to reserve a share of the mineral rights and we're

going to hold off until after that oil well is drilled. You can't ever tell."

"Whatever you say, son," Tom Walters said.

"Anyhow, we want to see the place," Cobb's mother said. "Son, when can we see it?"

"Come get in the car," Cobb said. "We got plenty of time before noon."

They sat crowded together in the single seat of Cobb's car, and when they neared the Simmons farm they did not talk. They told themselves the same thing. That if they did not take the Simmons farm someone else would. That Arthur Simmons had been foreclosed and had to move off. That he would move off whether or not they took the farm. And every man had to look out for himself in times like these.

Cobb turned off the gravel highway onto a narrow road of grayish, ungraded dirt. The topsoil here was a rich black loam spread generously over a stratum of limestone. It was called black waxy, and it was good soil, Cobb's father said. It turned deep, soft furrows and nurtured a fine crop of winter wheat. It was the best farm land in the county, Tom Walters said.

They did not know the Simmons place, and Cobb slowed at each mailbox set along the road to read the names. They came to a rusty box mounted on a wagon wheel and the name was barely visible, A. Simmons. Cobb turned off into a lane and they came out among dusty trees beside the dry stalks of a cornfield and saw the house.

Cobb glanced at his mother. She was peering intently at the house, a low structure of gray clapboards, perched high on limestone blocks so that daylight showed beneath. She smiled at Cobb. "I guess them are the new henhouses, son, over yonder by the corn crib."

Cobb nodded, and his father said, "The first thing we'll take and give 'em a coat of whitewash, in and out."

They drew up in front of the house, under a tree, and

saw an old couple sitting on the porch. The man's feet were bare; he wore a khaki shirt and overalls. The woman had a strong body and plump red arms. They both stood up as Cobb got out of the car.

"Mr. Simmons?—I'm Cobb Walters and these are my folks."

"Come in," Arthur Simmons said. "Come up on the porch and set."

Cobb helped his mother out of the car and they went toward the house. All were embarrassed, and Cobb explained, with his lips tightening, "Ardmore Devant sent us out."

"Yes," Simmons said. "Oh, yes."

"He said you were fixing to move off."

Simmons nodded and glanced at his wife, and she said, "Well, you know, we've been farming a long time. We figured it was time to take a rest. We're going to move to town."

Simmons drew up chairs and they all sat down. Cobb noticed that his father was taking inventory of the farm: the rock well, the corn crib, the broken pickets of the fence, the sag of the porch roof.

"My boy has a good job in Lebanon," Simmons said in a flat tone. "Maybe you know him? Joe Simmons. He's at the North Garage. Mechanic there."

"Yes, I believe I know Joe," Cobb said.

"He wants us to come to town and live with him," Mrs. Simmons said. "And we figured we'd done our share of this world's work. We aim to just rest up a little bit."

"My boy gets a hundred dollars a month," Simmons said. "You know, when he took a correspondence course I was set against it. I wanted him to be a farmer. But he always had a love of engines. We had an old Ford and he was always tinkering with it, and he could make it go. He could make anything go."

"A boy ought to follow his bent," Ada Walters said.

"We wanted Cobb to stay at home, too, but he went off to the oil fields. He's drilling that well, you know."

Cobb felt uneasily for a cigarette and answered the usual questions about the well. They were down just post-hole deep. It was too soon to tell anything. No, he couldn't say how deep they'd have to go. And all the time his thoughts were stored away in a separate bitter chamber of his mind.

They all want to have something to make 'em feel they still got a place in life and they got to brag on their boys. Joe Simmons with his mechanic's job and me drilling that well for a dollar a day. That's all they got left is their boys.

"It's good water in that well," Mrs. Simmons was saying. "You know, it's that limey water and it will leave a ring in your pots, but it's good water."

"We been drinking it ten years," Simmons said.

Mrs. Simmons took them out to see the henhouses, enclosed by chickenwire. She showed them the vegetable garden, which normally kept their table well supplied. Last year she had put up fifty quarts of tomatoes out of that garden, she said.

She showed them the smokehouse where hams were cured, but last year's hams were strong and crawling now with worms. She led them past red-ant hills to the back door of the house and into the kitchen. Two years ago the linoleum had been laid and it was hardly worn at all, she pointed out. The flies were bad, she said, because the screen was broken; they hadn't got around to fixing it, but just a few tacks and maybe a strip of burlap would do the job. Leaving out a new screen, that was.

There was a flue that had to be watched and a board here and there needed a nail. From the bedroom window you could see the clock tower of the Lebanon courthouse and a mockingbird liked to sing in the peach tree close by the house, she said. They returned to the porch.

"It's a mighty nice place," Ada Walters said. "Mighty nice indeed. You've done fine with it."

"It's good land, too," Simmons said. "For a man who wants to farm." His tone said that he had had enough of farming, but his eyes lingered on the barren stalks of the cornfield.

"Best farm land in the state of Texas," Tom Walters said solemnly.

A light came into Simmons' eye. "It is," he said. "You know it is. I remember in nineteen twenty. Was it nineteen twenty, Mother? I made a bumper crop of cotton and I won a blue ribbon for my Tom Watson watermelons at the Lebanon fruit show. I got second prize for my mushmelons, too."

"I recollect that was a good year," Tom Walters said. "But there won't be a fruit show this year, and I hear they've give up Old Settlers' Day, too."

"Why is that?"

"Costs too much in times like these. You know, the merchants and the banks got to pay out seventy-five dollars to put a float in the parade."

"When even the bankers got no money times are hard, sure enough," Simmons said in a tone that slurred bitterly.

"Ain't it so?" Tom Walters said.

They walked on to Cobb's car, and waited until the trees along the lane hid the house from view, then Cobb's mother said, "We'll be right comfortable there, Tom. It's a nice place."

"Yes, it's fine. And that's good land. Come a good, hard rain . . ."

Again on the second day there was a crowd at the lease when Cobb and Sandy relieved the morning tour. They were bored with answering questions and Sandy made frequent trips to the tool shed where he kept the jug of whisky. He winked at Cobb. "I can remember the time I'd of throwed a man in the slush pit if I'd caught him

drinking at the rig." He grinned. "Cobb, that still goes for you."

Late in the afternoon they pulled the spudder and ran the string of tools. The wedge-shaped bottom surface of the bit had been worn round as a knob and they had heated it cherry-red at the forge and pounded it back to a hollow shape like the hoof of a horse. The work of swinging sixteen-pound sledge hammers on that summer day had left them limp and hot.

They lowered the drill string into the hole, until the bit nearly touched the bottom, then Sandy made fast the clamp at the bottom of the temper screw to the drill cable and slacked off the cable, so that the weight of the tools was suspended from the temper screw and the walking beam instead of the crown block and bull wheel shaft. By letting out the screw Sandy could lower the tools into the hole until the length of a screw had been drilled, a total of nearly six feet. A driller's skill was in having the bit so suspended that it would strike with full impact against the subterranean rock.

Sandy started the engine with a turn of the telegraph wheel and the band wheel creaked, the pitman began its revolution, moving the walking beam up and down in its seesaw motion; in the earth below the bit was raised up and lashed down again, pounding its way in a series of shocks imparted by the jars. The rhythm of drilling had begun, the steady monotony of the engine, the slow oscillations of the walking beam, the regular creaking as the end of the screw rasped in its groove in the walking beam.

Cobb was busy, firing the boiler, tending the engine, helping Sandy on the rig floor. In less than an hour a screw had been drilled, the drill line was unclamped from the temper screw, the bull rope was attached, and the drill string was withdrawn from the hole. Then they ran the bailer, a long tube of steel in which to bring up the water and the cuttings held in suspension in the hole.

On a shelf above the lazy bench Cobb kept the book on petroleum geology, and as he waited for the bail to be brought up he sat on the bench to smoke a cigarette and read further in the book. Sandy snorted.

"Even if those fellers knowed anything I don't see what good it would do you to learn it, Cobb," he said. "They're sweating your body now, you want 'em to sweat your brains, too?"

"I'll sweat my own brains," Cobb said. "Sandy, do you know what a closed anticline is?"

"Of course I do."

"What is it, then?"

"It's when you got a hump down there underneath. There's a hump in the formation and the oil collects in it and can't migrate away."

"That's right," Cobb said. "Sandy, I believe you did read this book."

"Son, I was drilling wells before they thought that stuff up. What there is to know about oil wells didn't come out of that book, Cobb. It went into that book. I've been drilling wells for twenty-five years. Since the old Glenn Pool, boy."

Cobb closed the book. "But I ain't going to wait twenty-five years to learn it, Sandy. I want to know right now."

"What for?"

"Well, maybe it will do me some good. Maybe I can make something of myself."

"It ain't likely," Sandy said. "Give a hand with that bail."

As the bailer emerged from the hole Cobb put his shoulder against it and pushed it to the dump-box, a wooden chute which slanted to the slush pit. Cobb had placed in the dump-box an empty gasoline drum, adapted as a bucket with several strands of baling wire for a handle, and he filled it from the bailer.

He stood the bucket on the edge of the rig floor and

poured water into it, washed off the top water, and continued the process until the cuttings had settled to the bottom and the silt had been washed away. Then he dumped the cuttings on the edge of the rig floor to dry. Later Sandy would put a sample in a small cotton bag, label it with the depth from which it had been taken, and preserve it with his log of the well. He was a good driller and he kept a careful log.

Cobb directed the bit into the hole and watched the tools glide out of sight. "Sandy, all my life I kept my eye on my old man," he said. "I kind of watched him and I thought to myself that I was going to be like him, whether I wanted to or not. That I just couldn't help it."

Sandy grunted, watching for the marker on the line that showed where the bottom of the hole had been before.

"He came in a long time back and settled some land over on Fossil Creek," Cobb said. "But he never got along. He ain't been out of debt since I can remember. He had a section to start with, and he had plans to build it up and add to it and maybe raise a few cattle, too, and he had his heart set on black doddies—those Aberdeen Angus cattle without any horns. But he never owned anything but a couple of Jerseys for milking and he had to sell off land instead of buying more and he got down to a quarter section and he got to be middle-aged and he was still in debt, and he got to be old and broke-down and he's still got just a quarter section and he's deeper in debt than ever he was before. He just never had the initiative to make anything of himself, and he's taken orders so long off Ardmore Devant that he just ain't got a mind of his own. When I was a kid it used to make me mad, the way he'd take orders. I wanted him to stand up and say, 'Hell no, that ain't the way it wants to be done. It wants to be done this here way and that's how I'm going to do it.' But he never said it and he went on taking orders."

The marker on the line appeared and Sandy stopped the engine and attached the clamp to the cable.

"Well," Cobb said, "I'm scared I've got a little of that in me, too, and I'm going to fight it. Here I am twenty-five years old and I'm working for a dollar a day, but I don't want to be like my father, Sandy. I want to make something of myself. Like I said, I'm going to get mine, and when I'm old and broke-down nobody is going to push me around."

Cobb threw off the bull rope and kicked the heavy strands of manila to one side. Sandy started the engine and the walking beam rasped overhead.

"Cobb, your father is a good farmer, ain't he?" Sandy asked.

"Sure he is. One of the best."

"Then what more do you want? If a man is good at his trade, what more can you ask? You turn out a good driller and you're doing all right."

"No, sir," Cobb said. "That ain't smart. It ain't smart to sweat yourself for somebody else and make a million for him. Listen, I ain't criticizing my folks. They're the salt of the earth. That ain't what I mean. But look at us now, working for a dollar a day! You call that smart? No, sir, before I'm through I'm going to have men working for me."

"Right now you're working for me, Cobb," Sandy said, and grinned. "I'm your boss. Get out and take a look at that boiler."

7

THE small white cotton sacks hanging in a line on hooks above the lazy bench sway with the vibration of the derrick as the drilling bit lashes its way down through the rock. Five hundred feet, eight hundred feet, a thousand feet.

Once every tour the bit had to be changed. It would come up out of the hole blunted by the pounding impact with the rock deep below, and they would heat it in the forge and hammer it back to shape, a half hour's hard work.

They struck a water sand at a thousand feet and Sandy telephoned to Jesse Halliday in Wichita Falls, reversing the charges, and there was several days' delay before the long joints of casing arrived and were hauled to the rig. There was a crowd at the lease to watch them run the casing, and people who thought in terms of water wells believed that a thousand feet was surely deep enough to strike oil. Sandy told them of wells drilled down two miles into the earth.

Day after day they must answer questions, and often Sandy slipped into the shed and left Cobb to explain that when a hole was drilled down into the earth it had to be protected from caving in, it had to be protected from the inrush of subterranean water. So great pipes, twenty feet long, were inserted one by one into the hole, jointed together at the surface, and let down until they were past the water sand and lodged in rock, casing off the water. If deep down another water sand was encountered, Cobb explained, another string of casing would have to be run, inside the first all the way from the top down, and drilling

must be continued with a smaller bit because of the smaller casing. And if you had too much trouble underground, if you had to run too much casing, with each string of a smaller diameter, you might run out of hole and be forced to abandon the well because the hole was too small for effective drilling. There were a dozen ways to lose a hole.

Noon to midnight, day after day. The summer hours passed swiftly. The heat seemed to close in around Lebanon and isolate it from the world, and on the high ground where the derrick stood there was a separate sense of isolation. Day and night the boiler flamed and the walking beam swung up and down, the drill gouged deeper into the earth. Fifteen hundred feet: shale. Sixteen hundred feet: sandy shale. Seventeen hundred feet: hard limestone.

At the house on Persimmon Street there was the creaking of a rocking chair, a distant footfall on the pavement, the corner cry of the hot tamale man. Bright sunlight on the sycamores, the flap of washing hung to dry, the coming and going of delivery wagons, the ringing of a telephone. This morning world was a world without substance and Cobb felt that he had no life of his own now that he worked through the night.

A bois d'arc tree shaded a corner of the porch where there was a swing and a rocking chair, and there in the corner Cobb and Sandy sat and talked and tried not to notice the bustle of the household. But sometimes Clara or Nora left off her work and came to sit with them. Nora would smoke a black cigar and the things she liked to talk of were the pleasures she had found in living on a ranch.

Some day she would have a ranch again, if oil were found, Nora said. There had been six sections of land in West Texas, and out there if you owned three sections you controlled six sections, she said, because land had been given in alternate sections as a bonus to the railroad when it built through to the west and the rental on the railroad sections was a nominal sum, if you owned the alternate

sections. It was mesquite land, mostly, and sometimes it was pretty dry, but there was a certain smell to mesquite wood burning in a campfire and there had been a hillside where the ranchhouse stood, and a stone corral, and every night the coyotes had gathered in the nearest fringe of trees to howl. If she struck oil, Nora said, she'd buy that ranch again.

"But sometimes I don't care a hoot whether there's oil or not," she said one day to Cobb, puffing her small black cigar. "I wonder what will happen to this town if you do strike oil, and I wonder what will happen to Clara and me."

"I guess you'll both be rich as hogs," Cobb said. "Your farm is plenty close to the Abernathy well. If there's a structure you ought to be on it. But we haven't struck oil, Nora, and you ain't rich. If there's any oil down there we're a long ways from it."

Nora nodded. "When do you expect this Mr. Halliday back again?"

"He didn't say. I guess he'll show up one of these days. You want to see him?"

"No. I just wondered."

It was that day that Jesse Halliday returned. When Cobb and Sandy drove to the lease at noon they found him at the well with a big man who had the surprisingly well-groomed appearance that tailored clothes give a large man. He had square shoulders and a long, rounded face in which the color was high. His speech was slow and considered, a contrast to the sharpness of his blue eyes.

"This is Mr. Will Andrews," Jesse Halliday said over his shoulder as he stood with his hands on his hips watching the oscillation of the drill cable. "Make him welcome around here, boys. He represents the Trading Post Oil Company."

"Pleased to meet you," Sandy said. He put his hands on

the handle of the clamp and his arms moved up and down with the cable. He let the temper screw out a turn.

"You boys are making hole," Halliday said.

Sandy nodded. "We been lucky. Just that one water sand."

The scout examined the sacks of samples hanging from nails above the lazy bench. He held some cuttings in the palm of his hand, sniffed them, tasted them, then wiped his hands carefully with a silk handkerchief.

Jesse Halliday pulled up a folding camp chair and sat near the hole, watching the drilling. The scout went to look at the slush pit and flipped his cigar into it. When Sandy pulled the tools to run the bailer the scout's bright blue eyes watched the revolutions of the bull wheel and the steel cable winding on the shaft, checking Sandy's statement that they were down seventeen hundred feet.

Halliday remained at the well until late in the afternoon. He watched the walking beam move up and down, watched them bail the hole and dump the cuttings into the slush pit. He watched every move they made as Sandy and Cobb worked together now with co-ordination such that they rarely needed to speak. And all that afternoon Sandy looked longingly at the shed where the jug was hidden behind a sack of cement.

Before Jesse Halliday drove away with the scout he said to Sandy, "I'll be around town the rest of the day, and then I'm going back to Wichita Falls. If you have to get in touch with me, you know my number there. But don't call me unless it's important. I don't want to be bothered with little things."

"You hear that?" Cobb asked after Halliday and Will Andrews had gone. "He don't want to be bothered with little things. We stand here and sweat and work and drill him an oil well. He'll just go to Wichita Falls and sit with his feet on a desk and wait until we ring him up and say,

'Mr. Halliday, we got a million bucks or so for you here, in case you want to come and fetch it.' "

"If we do we'll get two thousand out of it, Cobb."

"Yeah, but what good will that do us? We still won't be smart. We'll still be a couple of dumb drillers, making a million for somebody else."

Sandy considered. "He's a long way from his million. I got an idea he's angling for bottom hole money. He'll get the Trading Post Oil Company to give him so much when he gets to the bottom of the hole, if it's dry. That's what he's after."

"Hell," Cobb said. "Let's eat. At least we can eat."

He carried the lunch basket from the car to a hogback of limestone on the crest of the hill and they sat there, watching the swift twilight shade the prairie.

Two hours later, when the derrick lights were on, an automobile approached the rig. The headlights flickered out and Jesse Halliday stepped from the car and came quickly to the rig floor.

"Well, hello," Sandy said. "We didn't look to see you again so soon."

"I'm on my way out of town," Halliday looked at Sandy with a peculiar squinting of his eyes, then glanced at the rig floor near the dump-box where the recent cuttings had been spread to dry. He leaned down to pick up a handful of the pulverized rock.

"We're in hard rock," Sandy said. "It's that black limestone."

"Yes." Halliday's hand closed on the cuttings. "When we get below that cap rock we're liable to hit the pay horizon. How far have you been in it?"

"Just eight or ten feet. We're drilling the second screw now."

Halliday pulled up the camp stool and watched the movement of the cable. "How is everything in town?"

"The same. People are beginning to think it's time we made an oil well."

Halliday grunted. "We don't want to lose the town's support. You know, this well means a lot to Lebanon. They've had hard times around here."

"You bet they have," Cobb said, with a sudden warm feeling for the promoter, in spite of the way his striped silk shirt clung to his grossly lumpy shoulders, in spite of the way he chewed his cigar to shreds and kept the thick eyelids drooped over his eyes.

Jesse Halliday glanced at Cobb, and the eyelids lifted slightly. "We ought to encourage 'em some, just to keep 'em interested."

"There's plenty of interest," Sandy said. "They come out here in family groups to watch us work. They stand around all day with their mouths open and watch that walking beam go up and down."

Halliday groped for a match to light his cigar. "I feel a sort of responsibility about this well," he said. "I feel a sort of responsibility to this town. Yes, I want to do my part to help 'em. Times have been hard here, and an oil well would put this whole county back on its feet. If I can accomplish that I'll feel that I've made the way a little easier here on this earth. I want to try to make people happy."

Sandy's eyebrows were slightly raised. His pale blue eyes questioned Cobb and swiftly returned to Halliday's face, which shone red in the electric lights.

"I got an idea," Halliday said. "Let's take and cheer those people up some. Let's show them some oil."

"I'd sure like to," Sandy said.

"Well, why not? All we got to do is pour a little in the hole and a little in the slush pit, just a barrel out of the fuel tank. It would make people feel better."

Sandy put his hands on the handle of the clamp and his

arms went up and down. "Maybe I didn't get you right. You mean you want to fake a showing?"

"Just to cheer people up some. Just a few drops round about. Just a few rainbows of oil."

"Without no pot of gold at the end of 'em?" Sandy said.

Halliday smiled faintly. "We'll find that pot of gold, all right. I'm convinced of it." He had found a match and he lit his cigar, sucking great hollows in his cheeks. He blew out smoke. "Anyhow, we'll just pour a little oil and see what happens. I believe it will do some good."

Sandy looked at Cobb, and Cobb shook his head and said, "I never was asked to salt a well before."

"I ain't asking you. I'm telling you," Halliday said harshly. "This here is my well. You boys pour that oil, like I told you."

Sandy glanced at Cobb. "Sure, it's your well."

Cobb's eyes were bright. "Sure, we'll pour it full of oil, if you say so. But I'll tell you this. I ain't going to let on for a minute that we had a showing. Anybody that asks, I'll tell where that oil came from."

Sandy took his hands off the handle of the clamp. "Same here, Mister."

Jesse Halliday chewed hard on his cigar, then laughed a half a breath. "Hell, if you boys are going to make a mountain out of it, just skip it. It was just an idea I had to cheer people up some and strew some roses as I went. Forget it."

"All right," Sandy said. "It's forgot."

But both Cobb and Sandy were angry. After Halliday had driven away, Cobb said. "That man figures that a dollar will go a long way. He figures it will buy our sweat and our lies, too. If I'm going to sell my lies it will come higher than a dollar a day."

"Cobb, I got a suspicion that dollar a day won't go on much longer. You know he don't want to pour that oil to cheer anybody up. He wants to use it to borrow some more

money, or to sell off some leases at a good price. That's what it is."

Cobb straightened and felt for his cigarettes. "Yes, I guess we can kiss that two thousand in oil good-by, Sandy, and start looking for another job any day now. I hear there's some wildcatting going on in the south of Oklahoma. I guess we better go up Tulsa way and see what we can do. But I'll never take another job like this here."

"I'll take what I can get," Sandy said.

Cobb shrugged his shoulders and walked away. He was depressed. He walked out over the hard, bare ground to fuel the boiler, and as the heat blasted his face the depression turned to fierce impatience.

I marked time long enough. I wasted away weeks of my life at this and as soon as this hole is plugged I'm clearing out. Somehow I'm going to get a break and I'm going to take off these overalls and I'm going to get what I want in the easy way, in the smart way, and not by sweat. I'm going to get mine whatever way I can. I won't never dress tools again. . . .

But the next morning Cobb awakened with the accustomed sense of futility. He felt that there was no use getting out of bed, to face another day of steady work, for nothing. When Clara called him for breakfast he dressed slowly and when he went down to the dining room Sandy had already eaten. Nora brought him his coffee and sat down across the table from him. "Cobb, I heard Jesse Halliday was in town last night."

"Yes, he was. He stopped by the rig."

"I wonder he didn't come in and see me."

"Didn't he?"

"No, I guess he just went out to the well. I guess he was just passing through. Nobody saw him. I thought he'd come around about the board bill."

Cobb set the coffee cup down. "Ain't you been paid?"

"Well, he gave me twenty-five dollars the first thing on account, but he hasn't loosened up with anything since. I haven't even seen him since then. But I suppose he's a busy man. Maybe if you reminded him . . ."

"Sure, I'll speak to him." Cobb frowned. "If I'd known I'd of spoken to him last night. But I thought he had paid up."

"Well, I can wait, but I have bills to meet myself." Nora hesitated, looking at Cobb closely. "Listen here, boy, I don't want you to hold back anything. Cobb, that S.O.B. ain't crooked, is he?"

"Now, Nora, I'll see you get your money. Don't worry about it."

Cobb sat on the porch and read the newspaper, and watched for glimpses of Clara as she went about her duties, waited the opportunity to exchange a quick smile. Soon before twelve she came to the door. "Cobb, your lunch basket is here on the table."

"Okay. Thanks."

He looked at the sunlight on her blonde hair, the indolent curve of her lips as she stood there only a moment, smiling at him. Later, when he started for the rig with Sandy, he remembered the lunch basket. But as he turned back to get it he hesitated, and thought that if he left it there on the table she would see it and bring it to them that evening at the rig. He smiled and walked on to the car, where Sandy was waiting.

On the way to the lease Cobb said, "He ain't even paid Nora for our board."

"He ain't?"

"Only twenty-five dollars when we moved in."

"Say, Cobb, I don't like that," Sandy said. "That's the one responsibility we got."

"Yes, it is."

"It's up to us to see she gets her money."

"We'll do that," Cobb said grimly.

As Cobb turned the car through the gate in the rock fence he saw several cars at the rig and Anson North trotted toward them, waving his hat. His fat face was pink and he was grinning as he stepped on the runningboard. "Did you boys see it?—Say, I guess it's all over town by now."

"What is?" Cobb stared toward the derrick.

"Oil, of course." Anson North said. "Oil! Didn't you know?"

Cobb glanced at Sandy and they got out of the car. They found Ardmore Devant on the floor of the rig, asking, "Is it all right to smoke a cigar? Is there any danger?" He was excited and the cigar trembled in his hand.

On the surface of the slush pit there were many hues; there were rainbows of oil. Sandy and Cobb looked at each other, then Sandy turned to Joe Rogers, who winked at them and walked away.

"It came up in the bail, just a little while ago," Bill Kaufman said. "It's a pretty good show, ain't it?"

"Ain't it?" Sandy said.

"Cobb, when will she start to flow?" Ardmore Devant asked. "Are you going to shoot it?"

Sandy was gazing steadily at Joe Rogers, who had returned with a defiant step. "Did you bring up any cuttings with that oil?"

Joe nodded. "Right yonder."

Cobb and Sandy went to the heap of cuttings drying in the sun and each picked up a handful. The cuttings smelled of oil, tasted of oil. Sandy looked at Cobb. "That black limestone."

"Cobb," Ardmore Devant said. "Can you tell about how much the well will make? Is she going to gush? Is she going to be a big well? Mr. Rogers said that maybe the structure was tight and if you shot it it would loosen up and flow a big well. Is that right?"

"That formation is tight, all right," Cobb said. "Come on, Sandy, let's dress."

As they put on their stained dungarees in the shed Sandy said, "That reminds me of a story."

"To hell with your story. What ought we to do?"

"It happened about twenty-five years back," Sandy went on. "About the time oil men were deciding that Pennsylvania wasn't the only place in the world where there was oil. There was a little town in Oklahoma and they let on they'd found oil and they poured some kerosene in a creek and got a big crowd there and struck a match to it. They sure sold lots of town lots."

"Sandy, you know damn well there's no oil in that hard black limestone," Cobb said. "It's got no more pores in it than a catfish. You know damned well Halliday came back here late last night and persuaded Rogers and Kaufman to salt that well."

"That's what he done, all right."

"So what are we going to do, Sandy?"

"I favor telling the truth."

Cobb put on the imitation Panama that now was stained almost black. "We do and this town will come down around Halliday's ears. That will be the end of the Abernathy well."

"Yes, I guess so."

"He'd have to shut down, and maybe there is oil down there. Hell, I don't know. Maybe we'd better act dumb."

"Whatever you say, Cobb."

Cobb led the way back to the rig floor, and as soon as they had been relieved Kaufman and Rogers went quickly to change their clothes.

"Well, how about it, Cobb?" Ardmore Devant asked. "What do you do now?"

"We just drill a hole," Cobb said. "We ain't made an oil well yet."

Ardmore's eyes squinted and his mouth opened slightly like a turtle about to snap.

"Right now we're drilling in hard rock and you won't find commercial oil in that kind of formation," Cobb said. "Down below, when we hit the sands, then we'll know."

Ardmore glanced at Anson North and Anson said, "You sure about that, Cobb?"

"He's right," said Sandy. "We got to go lots deeper. You don't find the Ordovician at seventeen hundred feet, and that's the horizon we're looking for."

Anson put both his hands in his pockets and looked down at the stained floor of the rig. "But see here, Cobb, it holds out a little hope, don't it?"

"While there's a hole there's hope," Cobb said, and grinned.

Ardmore and Anson remained at the rig for an hour. Sandy drilled a screw and they ran the bailer. When Cobb dumped the cuttings into the tall bucket the two men looked at the rainbow of oil on the gray surface of the water. They watched him pour off the top water and wash the cuttings clean. When he put them in a small heap in the sunlight Ardmore picked some up, sniffed, and said, "It smells of oil, Cobb."

"Uh-huh," Cobb said. "And it's still hard rock."

Ardmore let the cuttings fall from his hand into the slush pit. He looked at Cobb with distrust, and Sandy smiled. When the two men left for town, he said, "About all we done, Cobb, was to make 'em more convinced we got an oil well. They just don't trust us and they think we're trying to keep it back. People are used to hush-hush in the oil business."

But both Sandy and Cobb began to watch the bailer eagerly. Cobb realized that if the showing of oil had so much interested them, knowing that it was false, nothing would persuade the town that the Halliday-Abernathy No. 1 would not come in at any moment with a fantastic flow.

The proof of it was the crowd that gathered in the afternoon, pointing out the skim of color that remained on the water of the slush pit, the black stain on the floor-boards.

Ed Drum arrived, excited. "I tried to get my mother to come out, too, Cobb, but you know she hasn't stirred out of that office in years. Come on, tell me all about it."

"All I can tell you is this, Ed," Cobb said. "I wouldn't play it up too big."

"But ain't it big, Cobb?"

"Well, you can't sell oil by the pint," Cobb said. "Anyhow, we drilled on past it and now it's just water and hard limestone."

Ed frowned and tapped his pencil on the edge of the lazy bench, where he was sitting.

"When we get past that hard rock we'll know something," Cobb said. "In this section the oil sands are apt to be just below that formation. You ought to put that in your story."

"I don't want to run anything down, Cobb. Our policy is to boost anything local, particularly an oil well."

"But you don't want to raise false hopes, do you?"

"Is it a false hope, Cobb?"

"Right now it is."

Cobb saw Ed's squinted eyes, the quirk of his lips, and laughed. "Ed, you and me are old friends. I wouldn't hold out on you. I'm telling you the facts as I know them."

Ed smiled. "Sure. Of course you are. And thanks, Cobb."

Sandy and Cobb were both relieved when the sun sank low and the crowd departed. Late in the afternoon, an hour before sunset, Jan rode over from the Devant ranchhouse on her golden palomino horse.

Cobb grinned at her. "Don't tell me you came to see an oil well, too?"

"Why not? Cobb, Father thinks you're holding out on him. Tell me, is there any oil or isn't there?"

"There can't be," Cobb said. "In the nature of things, there can't be. I'll tell you why."

He helped her up to the rig floor, and when she was there beside him he felt more sure of himself and was less conscious of the barrier there had always been between them. He was confident, because this was something that he had done for himself and learned for himself.

"In the first place, Jan, you got to know what oil is and how it gets down there," he explained. "The theory is that it comes from organic matter, animal and plant life that was distilled through millions of years into petroleum. They figure that the rivers and creeks carried soil and vegetation down to the sea and the waves and tides spread the sediment over the bottom. Then fish and all kinds of minute organisms died and sunk to the bottom and in time the mud in which they laid was pressed into shale and the organic material into oil and gas." He grinned. "I know it's kind of hard to think of oil in terms of catfish and crappie. How many catfish to make a million barrels of oil? How many crappie? But it's organisms you can't even see that add up and there are millions of 'em in a ton of sea water. You know, algae, diatoms, little things that wiggle in a microscope."

Cobb was talking from the textbook on petroleum geology and he caught Sandy grinning as he parroted to Jan what he had read.

"Well, skip all that," he said. "Now, if you expect to find oil you got to have a source of it, and the source in this country is the sediment laid down by prehistoric seas that covered up the state of Texas. This part is simple. All this was an ocean. The surface rocks in Lebanon County were laid down by a sea in Cretaceous time and you can wedge the fossils out of the strata. You use ammonites for doorweights in your house; your horse scuffs them up in the creek. But an earlier sea would be our source, and it's covered over now by thousands of feet of rock that has

been pressing down since God knows when. There was a sea in Ordovician time, in the Paleozoic Era, and that would be a couple of hundred million years ago, when Texas was a land of swamps and cockroaches."

Jan was watching his face, with a half-smile on her lips, and Cobb was not sure that she was listening to what he said. He was deflated, and dropped down on the lazy bench.

"Go on, Cobb," she said.

"I don't want to bore you with all that stuff."

"No, I'm interested. Really I am."

"Well, then, we'll take those drops of oil. They were squeezed out of the shales into more porous strata, into sandstones and limestones, and they were pushed along through the pores by water trapped from the ancient sea. They float along on top of the water and along with the water until there comes some kind of trap, and in this section the traps are usually closed anticlines. So to have a pool of oil you got to have an anticline, only of course it ain't a *pool* of oil. It's porous rock and the oil has filled the pores like coffee soaks up in a lump of sugar. Now about anticlines, the point is that the crust of the earth is constantly changing. It lifts up, and the action of the winds and the seasons and the rivers wear it down again. They kind of balance each other off and they're operating all the time through millions of years. It's lifting up and it's wearing down all the time, at the same time, and in the uplift a fold may be formed in the rocks down below, and that's your anticline. The oil flows into the uplift with the water and is trapped there, surrounded on all sides by the salt water of the sea and under tremendous pressure from thousands of feet of overlying rock and from the hydrostatic head of the water. So if you drill into the uplift of the anticline you'll make an oil well, but if you drill into the syncline, off the structure, you'll drill into that salt water that flanks the oil.

"So to make an oil well you've got to have a source and you've got to have porous rock and you've got to have a trap. Our source here is the sediment of that Ordovician sea and that's down there maybe four thousand feet, maybe a mile. If you're going to find oil, that's the only place you *will* find it, and it's just against the nature of things to strike oil at seventeen hundred feet in Lebanon County. You see?"

"Well, then," Jan said. "I won't say it's clear to me, but still, where did *that* oil come from?" She pointed at the slush pit.

Sandy laughed. "Okay, Dr. Walters. Let's bail."

Cobb swung the bailer over the hole and guided it down. When he returned to Jan she was smiling. "Well, what's the answer?"

"It ain't explained in the book I got," Cobb said. "Tonight I'll read another chapter and I'll let you know."

"You do seem to know a lot about it," Jan said. "I remember when you were a kid you always wanted information. You always wanted to learn, didn't you?"

Cobb shrugged his shoulders and turned his eyes to the sand line, watching it glide into the hole, watching for the marker he had placed on the line.

"I really don't know whether you're very smart or not," Jan said. "But you always seem to be. You always look at a person with a question in your eye and you give the impression that you know the answer and wonder if they do, too."

"There's nothing behind those question marks but ignorance," Cobb said.

Jan tilted her head on one side, her lips pursed. "And you always seem such a complete entity, sufficient to yourself. You look as if you're busy inside, Cobb, and don't give a damn about anything else."

Sandy chortled, and Cobb looked at Jan, flushing. "Ain't

it my turn now? You know how you always impressed me, Jan?"

"Go ahead."

"Well, for one thing I always looked on you as a sort of little princess. You were sugar and spice to me, Jan, and to me you always acted like somebody had just pulled the strings, somebody who knew how little princesses ought to act."

"Oh, well," Jan said, and as Cobb had known she would she shied away from discussion of her own personality. She flicked with her quirt at a squaw weed that grew beside the rig and sent the tip of it flying. Then she smiled a slow, aloof smile that made Cobb grate his teeth slightly. "I've got to get home before dark," she said. "But I'm afraid Father was right, and you're holding out, Cobb. All those words didn't fool me."

She walked across to her palomino horse, tethered by the rock fence, and mounted. Just before she reached the gate an automobile turned through it and Jan raised one hand in a brief wave of greeting, then the car came on toward the well. It was Clara, and Cobb stepped down from the walkway to meet her.

She stopped the car facing the derrick and handed the lunch basket to Cobb. "You forgot this," she said. "Listen . . ."

"Now wait," Cobb said. "There it is on the slush pit. There's the stain of it on the rig floor. But it don't mean a damn thing so don't get excited."

"Why doesn't it mean anything?"

"Because it's phony."

"Phony?"

"It's a fake. I'm telling you this, Clara, but keep it to yourself. I'm convinced Joe Rogers salted that well."

"But why?"

"To keep the town interested. To maintain Halliday's credit. Probably to help sell off some leases."

"That doesn't seem right."

"No more it ain't, but that's the way it is."

"Oh, well, I suppose I didn't expect anything." She smiled. "This well seems to be quite an attraction of itself."

"Why?"

She looked along the road at the galloping palomino horse.

"I'm afraid it ain't the well, and it sure wouldn't be me," Sandy said. "I guess it has to be Cobb."

"She came out to see that show of oil," Cobb said.

"Yes, sir," Sandy said. "I believe that one is Cobb's ideal."

"She sure is," Cobb said lightly. "But she ain't my passion. She ain't my kind of woman."

Clara got out of the car and walked slowly over to the derrick, her legs as stiff as a cat by the fire.

"You're my kind of woman, Clara," Cobb said, digging into the basket. "Because you can cook."

"Nora fixes your supper," the girl said. "She's more your kind of woman. You like 'em with plenty of life, you said."

"That's right, and Nora would just about do."

"Isn't Jan Devant a little chilly for you, then?"

"Well, Jan is different," Cobb said. "Say, what happened to that marriage of hers? Who was the guy?"

Clara smiled. "He's a man of mystery. Nobody ever saw him. He never came to Lebanon. The story is that she eloped in New York, or something, and it's been whispered . . ."

"Never mind the whispers," Cobb said shortly.

The sun had set, and the twilight lingered only briefly. Here on the hilltop there was a hogback of limestone, on which Cobb had placed the basket, and beyond it there was close scrub growth angling down to the prairie. The land was a pale violet in the twilight, and the color seemed to

lift into the sky as the moon rose, on the wane, a lopsided orange above a low hill in the east. Then the stars became brilliant overhead, with the spidery structure of the der-rick black against them.

"Listen," Clara said.

A mockingbird had turned a nearby blackjack oak tree into an aviary, proudly singing the songs of all the birds.

Clara smiled at Cobb, and smiling, started back toward her car. She walked with a step so sure and confident that her shoulders swung slightly.

"Cobb, she's one fine girl," Sandy said. "And I believe you got the inside track."

"What gives you that idea?"

"When a gal flirts her little bottom like that, it's like a bird whisking its tail on a hickory limb when the buds are out in the spring. Just look at her."

Cobb grinned and followed Clara to her car. It was still very hot and even on the hillside there was no breeze, but she seemed cool, although her upper lip was slightly damp.

"Clara, even in weather like this you can stand the test," he said. He opened the door for her. "Damn it, I don't know why I ever took the afternoon tower. I don't feel like going back to work."

She was smiling, and as she bent her head to enter the car he leaned over quickly to kiss her. His lips slipped on her moist, hot mouth.

"God, it *is* hot," she said, and moved behind the wheel.

He shut the door and watched her as she stepped on the starter. "Maybe you didn't notice I kissed you?"

"Lord, was that a kiss?" She put the car in gear, smiled at Cobb, and drove away.

Cobb walked back to fire the boiler and he stood a long time beside it, looking up at the stars that came out so brightly as soon as the sun had set and the twilight had passed swiftly by. He looked at the red point of Antares

and breathed deeply. On a night such as this he felt that he could accomplish anything he pleased. His mind worked clearly and his spirit met the starlight half-way.

Like she said I got something inside me that wants to come out and I hold it back. I've always held it back. But not no more. I'm going to go places. I don't know how, but I'm going to get ready and when the chance comes I'll know how to take it. If I can just get that chance and see what there is for me to do. If I had a little money. If I had a little luck . . .

Cobb reached in his pocket and touched the Indian medicine man that he always carried with him now.

8

TWENTY-EIGHT hundred feet: hard lime and flint rock. The sand line breaks one day and they lose the bailer. For three days they fish, until at last they send down a latch jack and hook the bail and pull it out again. The steady progress of their work continues, noon to midnight.

For a week there had been crowds at the lease, but as time passed and the walking beam swung up and down on the hillside and there was no further show of oil, the town lost interest. The *Lebanon News* printed daily accounts of the progress of the well, but as the days passed the items became briefer, dropped back from the first page, and at last assumed a regular position beneath the personals column on the last page.

One day there were clouds banked on the western horizon just at sunset and before his tour was finished Cobb could not see the stars and a fresh wind cooled his face. They were down three thousand feet and the bit pounded in gray shale. The cuttings had no odor. There was no gas. Sandy hung on the line of hooks a small white sack labeled, 3,100, just before midnight, at the change of tours.

It was sprinkling when they left the rig, and they raced the storm to the house on Persimmon Street. In Cobb's room the curtains blew and rain splashed on the window-sill. At last the drought was broken and Cobb felt a sense of release as he heard the thunder of falling water. He slept that night like a farmer with a thirsty crop, the sound of the storm in his ears, and when he awakened the rain had stopped and there was a breeze.

It was cool in this room, that had been Clara's room. The tinted photograph of Clara hung on the wall, cretonne curtains that she had made blew gently in the west wind. On the bureau was a small enamel shoe in which there were yet two hairpins. Beside the shoe were his cigarettes, but he could not bring himself to make the effort to get them. He propped the pillow higher under his head and gazed out the window at the wet sweep of the plain and the dark green trees of the river bottom.

He heard light footsteps in the hall and smiled. Every morning Clara tip-toed past his room, her broom brushed softly along the floor of the hall. He turned his head and called her name in a low tone.

The noise of sweeping stopped and he listened, as he knew that she was listening, then he called again, "Clara?"

She was just outside his door, and he heard her whisper, "Cobb, are you awake?"

"Yes."

"It's early for you."

"Is it? What time?"

"Seven-thirty."

"I can remember when that was practically mid-day. How about breakfast?"

"I haven't even put the coffee on. I didn't expect you to wake up so soon."

"I'm wide awake," Cobb said. "And I'm hungry."

"You'll have to wait awhile." She giggled outside his door.

"Say," he said. "Come in a minute."

There was an instant of hesitation, then she opened the door. She wore a print frock, tied close at the waist and flaring wide at the skirt. Her legs were bare and her feet were in flat bedroom slippers. She looked smaller, and without high heels the carriage of her body was different. Her breasts were higher, and clearly molded by the dress.

"Want to do me a favor?" Cobb asked.

"All right."

"Get me my cigarettes there on the bureau."

He watched her cross to the bird's-eye maple bureau, hesitate before the mirror, and take the two hairpins from the enamel shoe and tuck them in her hair. She brought him the cigarettes and held out the package, standing two feet from the bedside. In the morning she wore no powder and he saw the freckles on her nose. Her hair was pinned up on top of her head.

Cobb looked at her firm body and moistened his lips before putting a cigarette in his mouth. "Want one?"

Clara glanced at the door, which she had left open. "Nora doesn't like me to smoke."

"That sounds funny, coming from Nora. Does she want you to drink?"

Clara laughed softly, then crossed on tiptoe to the door and closed it. She leaned her broom beside the door. Cobb held out the package of cigarettes and she took one. He struck a match and lit both their cigarettes.

"That was a pretty good rain," he said. "Too late to do any good, though."

"Yes, too late." She glanced around the room. Cobb's clothes were heaped on the only chair. She made a face. "You sure are messy."

He edged over in the bed, which squeaked loudly. "Here's a little room. Sit down."

She blew out smoke, and the way her lips were turned down at the corners gave her a sulky look.

Cobb flicked his ashes on the floor and she said, "Look at you," but the unnatural tone of her voice was not rebuke.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and crossed one leg over the other.

"You look cute with your hair pinned up," Cobb said. "You ought to wear it that way."

"Lordy, it's terrible like this. I oughtn't to let anybody see me."

"I like it. I like those pert little freckles you got."

She rubbed her fingers gently over her nose, and her hand covered the lower part of her face up to her eyes. The expression of her eyes was strangely remote. Cobb looked at her strong body and the high curves of her breasts. He was sure that she had nothing on under the dress.

"It's cooler today," he said. "After that rain."

"Kind of."

"Under ninety, I guess."

"Eighty-nine an hour ago."

"That's still plenty hot for firing a boiler."

Cobb finished his cigarette and lit another from the stub of the first. He flipped the stub out the window and Clara watched it fall from sight. "You're hopeless, Cobb."

"You know, your ears are kind of cute. You oughtn't to cover 'em up."

She glanced toward the mirror on the bureau. "You know that isn't true, Cobb. It's too early in the morning for flattery. A girl needs a little moonlight to believe things like that."

"All right. If I can ever get you in the moonlight I'll tell you plenty."

"You've been practicing, I'll bet."

"Practicing?"

"Well, pretty near every time I go out to the well Jan Devant is there."

"She's been there twice. Twice in all this time."

Clara put her head on one side. "Then you're not so good as I thought."

He laughed. "What do you care about Jan Devant?"

"I don't. But when a girl as good-looking as that rides out to that greasy rig to see you—well, Cobb, I don't think you're very smart."

Cobb considered. His cigarette had burned low and he flipped it out the window after the first.

"No, Cobb," she said. "You're not very smart."

Her steady, wide eyes were turned to his face. They looked at each other and Cobb caught his breath slightly. She moved her shoulders and her breasts rose under the dress.

They heard the noise of an automobile, and Clara turned her head toward the window, listening. The car passed on down Persimmon Street. She said softly, "I thought that was Nora."

"Ain't she downstairs?"

"No, she went to town."

Cobb's mouth opened and his eyes squinted almost shut. She had said that her mother did not like her to smoke and she had shut the door. Her mother was in town, but she had shut the bedroom door.

"You're right," Cobb said. "I ain't very smart."

His hand touched her wrist, slid along her bare arm. He sat up, and put his arm around her. Their faces came together and he kissed her hard. Then she pulled away and was on her feet, but leaning over because his hand held her wrist.

"I told you I was after you," Cobb whispered, and held her arm tightly. He reached out his other hand and caught her shoulder. She brought her lips down slowly for his kiss, and they were heavy and parted slightly. It was a long kiss, and his arm slipped around her waist and drew her close. Her body relaxed and one foot came off the floor and a slipper fell. The noise was loud in the still room.

She never spoke, never whispered, and then she was looking at him with her gray-green eyes opened abnormally wide and she had never seemed more remote. Cobb felt for the package of cigarettes and found it, but there was no match.

She was watching him, and he heard her say in a vibrant whisper, "You don't really want a cigarette, do you?"

"No, I guess not." He let it fall to the floor.

"Then hold my hand."

His hand found hers and he felt the clench of her fingers. "You're sweet, Clara," he whispered. "You sure are a sweet girl."

The grip of her fingers lessened, then her hand was limp in his. "I mean it," Cobb said.

"Oh, I believe you mean it." Her voice was husky. "But I don't want you to think of me as a sweet girl. I'm not sweet at all. Cobb, is that all you think of me? I mean sweet?"

"Hell, no," Cobb said. "I think you're fine. I think you're swell. You ought to know that."

She sighed. "I think you're pretty fine yourself."

She turned her head to one side and gazed out the window. Her hair had come unpinned and was spread across the pillow. For a long time she looked out at the moving leaves of the bois d'arc tree. There was a slight catch in her slow breathing and Cobb heard it. "What's the matter?"

Her head moved against the pillow. "Nothing's the matter."

"Now see here." He touched her cheek and it was wet. "Did I say anything?"

She shook her head.

"If I did you know I didn't mean it. What's the matter, honey?"

"Nothing. I told you nothing." She turned suddenly and pressed her face into the pillow.

"Hey," Cobb said. "Clara, are you crying?"

Her shoulders shivered and he patted her back gently. "Now don't cry. I don't want you to cry."

She raised her head, her weight on her elbows. Her eyes were swollen. "Just don't say anything, Cobb. Don't say *anything*. I'm all right now."

"You had me worried," Cobb said. "I wouldn't want to do anything to make you cry."

"You haven't done anything. It's nothing." Her fingers groped for his hand. "But kiss me, Cobb."

He kissed her tenderly, and she closed her eyes. She was silent for a moment, then she said, "I can't explain it, Cobb, but I just had to cry a little. Maybe it's because I'm happy."

"That's no way to show it."

"I can't help how I show it."

"I'm pretty happy myself," Cobb said. "But I don't feel like crying. I feel like whooping."

"Then go ahead and whoop."

"I guess not. I better not whoop and holler on an empty stomach. How about some breakfast, honey?"

She sat up, and her face was as pink as her eyes. She began to laugh, then nodded her head slowly. "Sure, I'll fix you something. Soon as I'm dressed. Turn the other way, Cobb."

He grinned and faced the wall. He heard her bare feet moving lightly on the floor, then the heavier tread of her slippers. A moment later the door was gently closed and he turned his head. She had gone.

While he was dressing Cobb heard her voice downstairs. The telephone had rung and as she answered it her tone was airy and gay. Cobb paused in front of the mirror, contemplating. A moment before she had been almost angry; she had been in tears, and he knew why. Now she sounded radiant. She sounded as if nothing had happened.

Then he heard her quick, light footsteps on the stairs and a knocking on the door of Sandy's room.

"A call for you, Sandy," Clara said. There was excitement in her voice. "It's from the well. Joe Rogers, calling from the Goback place."

Cobb went to the door and put his head out. "What's all this?"

"I don't know, Cobb. Maybe it's oil!"

Sandy came out of his room and went downstairs, and as he finished dressing Cobb heard Sandy talking. When he went down to the telephone Sandy had just hung up and Clara was saying, "Sandy, aren't you going to tell me what it is?"

Sandy looked at her eager face. His mouth drew down at the corners. "It ain't oil, Clara. It's just a little trouble they've had. Cobb, we got to go out to the rig."

"I'm ready."

"Quick as I get dressed, then."

"Everybody is so secretive," Clara said. "So secretive. Cobb, it makes me wonder. *Have* they struck oil?"

"Sandy wouldn't lie. I expect it means we have to fish some more."

She met his eyes, and there was a moment of silence. The smile faded from her face, and as Cobb stepped toward her she turned quickly away, saying over her shoulder, "Your coffee is ready."

When Sandy came downstairs he paused only for a cup of coffee, then they drove to the lease. When they left the house behind Sandy said, "Boy, it looks like we've drilled our last screw."

"Is it that bad a fix? What happened?"

"There's a truck out there to get the tools. It seems he rented them tools, Cobb. He didn't own 'em. He rented 'em off a fella in Wichita Falls and the fella sent to get 'em back."

Cobb whistled. "Then it's the end of the rope?"

"It's the end of the drill rope, for a fact. Hell, I figured at least he owned them tools."

"He don't own a thing but a silk shirt and a Panama hat. All he's got is front."

"And he's out at the behind," said Sandy. "And, Cobb, so are we. What we got to think of now is how are we going to eat."

At the lease they found Kaufman and Rogers sitting on

the lazy bench watching the truck crew load the tools. Joe Rogers came to meet them.

"You heard anything from Halliday?" Sandy asked.

"No. Just these guys came after the tools. They got some papers and I guess we got to let 'em have the tools."

"For all of me they can have 'em," Sandy said. "Joe, the next time you pour oil in a slush pit you better find out why you was asked to do it."

Cobb stood looking at the derrick, at the brackish slush pit and the rusty bits laid out on the grass. It was the end of the Halliday-Abernathy No. 1, he thought. It was the end of hopes of oil in Lebanon. But he had seen it coming all along. He had known there would be no oil.

"So that's that," Sandy said. "Now what?"

"I believe I'll head up toward Tulsa," Cobb said. "And I believe I'll start out pretty quick" They walked back to Cobb's car and he said thoughtfully, "Sandy, I wish now we'd told the facts about that well being salted. It's on my conscience some."

He drove slowly to town, and when they reached Persimmon Street they found Clara in the garden. with a huge Mexican straw hat on her head. She came quickly to the fence. "Well, what was it?"

Cobb got out of the car and stretched his legs. "The well is played out," he said.

Nora's round face appeared at the kitchen window. "What's that you said, Cobb? What's that you said about the well?"

"I said it was played out."

"No oil?"

"No oil."

"Well, damn it all," Nora said. She ducked her head back out of sight and a moment later appeared on the back porch. "Cobb, where is that Mr. Halliday?"

"I don't know. Wichita Falls, I expect."

"When is he due back here?"

"I couldn't say."

"I got me an idea this town has seen the last of him, Nora," Sandy said. "Halliday didn't even own his tools. He done the whole job on credit. He rented some second-hand tools and this morning the dealer sent after 'em."

"Then he's not paying off?"

"That's what it looks like."

"Well, that S.O.B.," Nora said. "He owes me fifty bucks. That S.O.B."

"Cobb, why didn't you tell us?" Clara asked, with a puzzled frown. "You ought to have given some warning."

"Why, Cobb didn't know," Nora said, with a reproving glance at her daughter. "Did you, boy?"

"Not until today. I thought he owned those tools, and so did Sandy." Cobb put one hand on Nora's shoulder. "But you're going to get paid. I'm going to see you do."

"Cobb, you know what they're going to say, of course," Clara broke in. "You're a Lebanon boy. You should have warned us."

"We knew he was pressed for money," Cobb said. "And we were working for a dollar a day ourselves. But we only found out bit by bit how much credit he'd piled up."

"We don't blame you, darling, but you know what they're all going to say. They're going to think Lord knows what."

"Yes, I guess so. Well, I can bear it. I'm leaving town anyhow, quick as I can."

"You're going away, Cobb?"

"You bet I am." He glanced at her, and her steady gaze made him uncomfortable. "You see, I . . . Well, I'll be coming back and it won't be five years this time."

She touched his arm. "Don't you think you ought to stay here and explain?"

"Explain what? That I was a sucker, too? That's all I got to explain. No, I'm leaving town, but I'll stop by the

Lebanon *News* and tell Ed Drum the facts. I can depend on Ed."

Clara followed Cobb up to his room, watching him pull his suitcase from the closet and pack it. "I'm a sucker, all right," he said. "Just a sucker. Just a dope. Even if we'd made an oil well it wouldn't of done me much good. And now that it's abandoned it's me they're going to blame. It's pretty smart."

"Smart, Cobb?"

"I mean Halliday is smart. Yes, he's a smooth operator. He drilled an oil well down three thousand feet and let the town pay the bill. He didn't risk a cent. Everybody helped pay for that well, including me."

"I don't call that smart." She sat down, gazed at him, said anxiously, "Cobb, don't take it that way. Don't harden yourself. You're hard enough as it is."

"I tell you, honey, it's a case of go thou and do likewise with me. I learned a lesson. Next time I won't be the sucker in a deal like this. I'll be the smart guy."

She sucked her underlip. "What are you planning to do?"

"I'm going up to Tulsa. I'm going up to the oil capital of the world. I'll get my hands on something there. I'll get a job to tide me over."

She hesitated, avoiding his eyes. "Cobb, can't you find something here in Lebanon? Do you have to go away?"

"I'm an oil driller."

"But, darling, I don't want you to go away."

He frowned and reached for his cigarettes. "I got to go. But I'll tell you this. I'm sure going to miss you, honey."

She smiled. "Then you do have some feeling about it." She did not meet his eyes. "About me."

"I told you I thought you were swell."

She made a face. "Is that as far as you can go?"

"It's pretty far for me."

"But it's not far enough for me, Cobb."

He struck a match and lit his cigarette. "Well, I don't know what else to say. You've got to take me as I am, Clara."

"Oh, well." She moved slowly toward him. "I suppose I want you to be honest. I don't want you to lie. I don't want you to say you love me, if you don't."

"Now see here," Cobb said, and put his arms around her.

"But don't say it," Clara whispered. He kissed her and after a moment she pressed her cheek against his, said into his ear, "Then when you do say it—if you do, Cobb—I'll know you mean it."

"I don't know what I feel," Cobb said. "I don't know whether I'm in love with you or not. But I like you better than anybody."

"Cobb." Her whisper caressed his ear.

"Yes."

"I do love you."

Cobb's arms tightened around her, but his heart was heavy. He closed his eyes hard and kissed her.

After a moment she drew away. "I don't suppose you have any money, darling?"

"I don't suppose I have."

"I can lend you something."

Cobb shook his head.

"Don't be stubborn about it, Cobb. I don't need the money and you do."

"I'll make out," Cobb said. He strapped the suitcase and took it from the bed, picked up his hat.

"Cobb, wait a minute for me." Her face was averted. "I'll see you downstairs."

Cobb went down and put his suitcase in his car, and a moment later Sandy joined him. Nora stood at the garden fence, talking, saying that she was sorry, saying that she didn't blame Cobb, saying that she was sure no one would blame him and if they did she would tell them to

go straight to hell, saying she was glad to have had him with her, saying that she didn't know what would happen to Lebanon now that hope of oil was gone.

When Clara came down she had tied a kerchief over her head and carried her handbag. She opened the door of the car and said, "Move over, Sandy."

"Say, where do you think you're going?" Cobb asked.

She smiled. "Don't be alarmed. Just to town with you."

As he drove to the square Cobb glanced at her intent face, but said nothing. She told him to let her off in the square and he nosed the car to the curb.

"I'll be back in half a minute," she said. "Please wait."

Cobb was depressed. He looked around him at the courthouse and the buildings on the square. He saw the names of men he knew painted on the store fronts, the names of people who trusted him, who had extended credit for the operation of the Abernathy well. The idlers under the elm trees would have something to talk about, and he knew that he would be blamed.

Clara returned and held out her hand. "Cobb, I'm going to say good-by now. When are you coming back?"

"I just can't say. I wish I knew."

"You'll write me as soon as you're settled?"

"You bet I will."

Her hand met his and she pressed something into his palm. Cobb felt the roll of bills. "Now say, I told you I couldn't take it."

Her fingers closed around his. "Cobb, you remember what I told you?"

"No. What do you mean?"

"I mean what you wouldn't tell me." Her eyes searched his face. "So you see, you'll let me help you, Cobb." She stepped back, and there were tears in her eyes.

"I'll write you the very first thing, and you can reach me general delivery, Tulsa," Cobb said. "And I'll be back to get you one of these days. I'll be back with plenty of

dough in my pocket and we'll take the world by the tail and swing it like a cat. Won't we?"

"We sure will."

"Come a little closer."

She shook her head. "Good-by."

"Damn it, I hate to go," Cobb said. "Good-by."

He backed out into the square, and as he drove away he shoved the bills into his pocket. On the way to Tulsa he turned off to Fossil Creek to say good-by to his parents and he counted the money. It came to one hundred dollars.

9

COBB WALTERS did not like Tulsa. He preferred that part of Oklahoma where oil had not been found. He liked the plain land and the hills and the people who lived there, the scrub oak and the mistletoe that he saw as he followed the highway northward. The story of Tulsa was the story of oil in Oklahoma, and in Tulsa they liked to show photographs of the town at the turn of the century, a crossroads village with a dozen falsefront stores and unpainted shacks and a wide main street that seemed expectant of the plow. That was Tulsa before the Sue A. Bland well came in for a hundred barrels a day at Red Fork, four miles away, in the summer of 1901.

Red Fork was the beginning. The first dose of oil was a small dose, but the bottle it came from was tremendous; it was the Mid-Continent field. The boom was brief, but Tulsa had been ready when they drilled into the Glenn pool, south of the town, four years later. Free land for building sites was the bonus offered to oil companies, tool companies, supply houses. The big companies went to Tulsa and made it the oil capital of Oklahoma, of the Mid-Continent field, of the world. Within two years four thousand wells were pouring forth a hundred and twenty thousand barrels of oil a day, and as new fields were discovered Tulsa became the headquarters of their operations. Tulsa felt that oil belonged to Tulsa and no one doubted that Tulsa belonged to oil.

As he drove into the city Cobb was depressed. His old car crept like an intruder along avenues lined by expensive

homes, and Cobb felt himself an intruder. In a city such as Tulsa a poor man was conscious of his poverty.

"Sandy," he said. "Some day I'm going to build me a house like one of those. I'll put a hundred thousand dollars into it and I'll have me an expensive woman to go with it. When I want anything I'll phone to the store to get it and they'll say, 'Yes sir, Mr. Walters,' and they'll hustle it out. My credit will be that good. I won't pay cash. I won't have to carry money in my pocket. They'll know I'm good for it."

"You got no money in your pocket and you want to get rich so you won't need to have money in your pocket," Sandy said. "How do you figure that?"

Cobb followed Sandy's directions to a cheap hotel south of the business district, beyond a viaduct that bridged railroad tracks. They left their bags in their room and that first day they made the rounds, but found no work. The next morning as they were having breakfast in a corner café Cobb looked Sandy up and down. He inspected his faded shirt, open at the throat, his worn trousers and shoes.

"Sandy, we ought to take a lesson from Jesse Halliday," Cobb said. "We ought to get us some front."

"Cobb, you're hipped on that."

"Halliday learned me a lesson, though," Cobb said. "Come on, let's go uptown."

Cobb wanted a silk shirt and a stickpin; he wanted a Panama hat. But he bought a dark gray shirt and a light blue tie to go with it. He bought gray trousers and a dark brown straw hat. As they stood on the sidewalk in front of a store mirror to inspect themselves Cobb said, "It does make a difference. Even in an old cockroach like you. Don't you feel like you got some money in them new pants?"

"If I did I'd buy some whisky with it."

"No whisky," Cobb said.

And that afternoon Cobb felt less conspicuous as he

went into the lobby of a downtown hotel where he knew oil men gathered. Yet he felt that he needed an excuse for entering the hotel, in case anyone should ask his business, so he went to the cigar counter and bought a package of cigarettes. He could have bought them elsewhere for three cents less.

As he turned away from the counter, opening the package, he stopped short and his lips turned up in a satisfied grin. On the other side of the lobby, seated in an overstuffed chair beside a potted palm, was Jesse Halliday. The muscles toughened by weeks of swinging a sixteen-pound hammer tightened as Cobb walked deliberately across the lobby. Halliday did not notice him until Cobb planted his feet wide in front of the chair.

"Well, *Mister* Halliday," he said.

The promoter put his hands on the arms of the chair and started to rise, then he saw Cobb's clenched fists and let himself fall back again into the chair.

"So it's the dry hole expert," Cobb said. "Remember me?"

Halliday said crisply, "How are you, Walters."

"I'm one of the men drilled a well for you in Lebanon," Cobb went on. "Remember me? I'm one of your creditors, and I came around to collect."

"I'm planning to take a run down to Lebanon the first of next week to settle up," Halliday said. "It's been pretty hard going for me."

"For me, too," Cobb said. "For the whole town."

"Yes, it's too bad we had a dry hole." He looked keenly at Cobb. "You looking for work."

"I'm looking for money owed me."

"Yes, of course. You'll get it. But I thought maybe you'd like another job."

"On the same terms, Mr. Halliday?"

"Yes, I'm fixing to drill a well down near Durant, and . . ."

"You're going to do it all over again?" Cobb's eyes opened wide. "You're going to do the same thing again? Good God."

"I'm planning to drill a well, if that's what you mean."

"And some town's going to pay for it? And you're going to rent the tools and get the rig on credit and the fuel on credit and the labor on credit and maybe salt the well and sell off your leases? God damn, I've got to hand it to you."

Halliday rose to his feet, more sure of himself. "Do you want to go to work?"

"No. I want the money coming to me, and to Sandy Lake. You owe us fourteen bucks each. That's the first thing I want."

Halliday hesitated, then reached in his pocket and took out a roll of bills. He counted off two tens, a five and three ones. Cobb took the money.

"And another thing," he said. "There's Mrs. Joplin's board bill. She sent me to collect."

Halliday returned the money to his pocket. "Now listen, Walters. I'm broke. I took it on the chin down there at Lebanon. You know that. I'm doing everything I can to raise a little cash and when I do I'm going down to Lebanon and settle up."

"Are you now?" Cobb said. "Well, it's none of my business. But Nora Joplin's board bill *is* my business. I ate the food you owe her for, and I slept in her bed. She asked me to collect, and I'm here to collect. Aside from that it's none of my business, so if you hand over fifty bucks for her the rest of it is just between you and your conscience, if you got any."

Halliday set his jaw, and looked at Cobb's squared shoulders. Then he managed a grin. "All right, I'll give you the money." He counted out fifty dollars. "And I'll take a receipt, Walters."

Cobb smiled. He sat on the arm of the chair and scrib-

bled a receipt. Giving it to the promoter, he said, "Anyhow, I want to thank you. You learned me something."

"I did?"

"Sure. You learned me a lot."

Halliday grunted. "No hard feelings, then?"

"No hard feelings at all," Cobb said, holding the money in his pocket.

Cobb whistled softly as he went out of the lobby and along the street in the bright sunlight. He kept whistling all the way back to the small hotel across the viaduct, where he spread the money on the bed in front of Sandy.

"Fella, we're in the chips."

Sandy stared at the bills.

"I collected off of Halliday, for you and me and Nora Joplin," Cobb said. "We got seventy-eight bucks here and I still got ninety. That's a hundred and sixty-eight dollars, Sandy. You got anyhow a couple of bucks left, haven't you?"

"A little more than that."

Cobb grinned. "A hundred and seventy bucks!"

"Some of it belongs to Nora, though."

"Sure it does. I'll send it to her." But Cobb kept looking at the money and he said again, "A hundred and seventy bucks."

Sandy lay back with his head pillowed on his arms. "Cobb, did you stop to think how much of that is yours? In case you've forgot fourteen dollars is yours."

Cobb frowned and began picking up the money.

"Fourteen of it is my wages," Sandy went on. "Of course I owe you more than that and you're welcome to it. But fifty bucks belongs to Nora and a hundred you borrowed off Clara."

"How did you know that?"

"I ain't blind."

"It's a lot of money," Cobb said. "For us it is. It's been

a long time since I had a hundred and seventy dollars in my hand."

Sandy glanced at the alarm clock on the dresser and stood up. "Cobb, maybe I found us a job."

"Good. Sandy, that's fine. Where?"

"Well, I ran into a wildcatter I drilled a well for a long time back and he said to come up and see him this evening. There's a friend of his fixing to drill a wildcat and he ain't hired a crew yet."

"Then where's he at?" Cobb said. "Let's go see him."

"He's at the Territory Hotel."

"That sounds like money."

"He said he had a soot there."

"Then let's go."

"Not just yet. He said after supper."

They ate at a café on the corner and walked uptown, and when they reached the Hotel Territory Cobb walked in with none of the uneasiness he had felt earlier in the day. They went up in the elevator and Sandy explained, "His name is Tom Haley, Cobb. I drilled a dry hole for him a long time back."

Sandy tapped lightly on the door of the suite, and a tall man opened it. He was in his shirtsleeves, smoking a cigar. "Hello there, Sandy. Come in. We were just sitting down to a poker game. You interested?"

Sandy shook his head. "This here is Cobb Walters. I told you about him."

Tom Haley put out his hand, and said to Sandy, "The man I was telling you about is here now. He's looking for a good driller, Sandy, and I told him I didn't know any better."

"Thanks," Sandy said.

They followed Haley into another room where three men sat around a table. Cobb swore softly under his breath as Haley introduced them. "These boys are looking for

that drilling job. Boys, this is Mr. Sampson, Mr. Tompkins and Mr. Halliday."

Jesse Halliday licked his lips, then smiled.

"Jesse, you want to talk to 'em?" Haley asked.

"I believe I know 'em," Halliday said.

"I believe so," Cobb said.

"That's right," Halliday said. "I just paid those boys off, didn't I, Walters?"

"You sure did." Cobb was grinning.

"They drilled a well for me down in Texas," Jesse Halliday said. There was a damp film on his forehead. "Walters, have you two changed your mind about going to work for me again?"

"What's all this?" Sandy asked.

"I forgot to mention it," Cobb said. "Mr. Halliday is going to drill a well down at Durant and he wants us to go to work for him."

"I guess not," Sandy said. "I don't like it down to Durant. It's too near that Red River. The bugs are so bad."

"Well, say," Haley said. "It's a fine thing when drillers start getting temperamental. Don't like the bugs!" He laughed, and sat down at the table. "You boys want to take a hand?"

Sandy shook his head and Cobb hesitated, then said, "Mind if we watch?"

"Pull up a chair."

It was stud poker, table stakes. A player could not buy chips after a hand had been begun. He had to keep all his chips in front of him and he could bet the limit of his chips. If the bet was more than he had in front of him he could call for the amount he had.

Cobb stood behind Jesse Halliday. Haley was dealing, and Cobb saw Halliday's hole card as he lifted its corner. It was a jack, and his up card was a ten. Haley dealt around and the betting was light. Before the last card was dealt Sampson had folded. Tompkins had a pair of threes

showing, Haley an ace, four, eight, and Halliday a ten, seven, jack. Haley dealt the final card and apparently no hand had improved.

"Beat the threes," Tompkins said. He was a thin, intent man, and he played with his shoulders hunched and his elbows on the table.

Haley looked at Tompkins' hand, then scanned Halliday's. He pushed a stack of blue chips out, then another stack—ten blue chips. Jesse Halliday sucked his underlip and looked again at his hole card, a jack to match the jack that was showing. With the edge of the hole card he flipped the other cards face down. "I fold."

Cobb sucked in his breath and a light came into his eyes. Halliday could be bluffed. His front was more false than it seemed. He saw Tompkins call the bet, saw Haley show a pair of eights. Halliday passed his palm over his damp forehead, but said nothing.

Cobb cleared his throat. "Say, I might take a hand at that, if you fellas don't mind."

"Sure, glad to have you," Haley said. "Sit in. How many chips you want?"

Cobb drew up a chair, opposite Halliday. "What do they sell for?"

"The blues are ten dollars and the whites are five."

Cobb dropped into the chair. He swallowed. "It ain't penny ante," he said, and saw Sandy looking at him, rolling his eyes slightly. But he was sitting at the table and Haley had the box of chips in front of him. "Let's see," Cobb said nervously, "I believe a hundred and fifty will be enough to start with. All in blues."

"All in blues," Haley said, and counted out the chips. Cobb slipped the money out of his pocket, under the table, took eighteen dollars from the roll, and tossed the rest across to Haley.

"Your deal, Jesse," Haley said.

Cobb folded his first hand and watched. Halliday had

about two hundred dollars in front of him, Haley five hundred and Sampson and Tompkins about three hundred each. With Cobb's stake there was nearly fifteen hundred dollars in the game. This was not knock rummy at ten cents a game; this was not penny ante. Cobb breathed fast and watched the turn of the cards and avoided Sandy's eyes.

On the next hand Cobb had aces back to back. He put his hand in his pocket and felt the medicine man. He had the high hand and pushed out one blue chip. Only Tompkins folded. On the second round the ace still was high and Cobb bet twenty-five dollars. He saw Halliday hesitate, start to raise, and then call. Cobb was sure Halliday had a pair, but the highest card showing in his hand was a queen. After the last card had been dealt Cobb's ace-high hand was still high, and he pushed out all the chips he had left. Halliday and Sampson called and Cobb turned up his hole card.

"Aces wired," he said, and his throat was stiff. He reached for the pot. He had won three hundred and fifty dollars and there was five hundred dollars in blue chips in front of him now. One pay-day in Borger he had won ninety dollars in an all-night game and that had topped his poker winnings. He saw Sandy get up from his chair and walk to the window, then back to his chair, trying to catch his eye.

Jesse Halliday bought more chips. He counted out two hundred dollars, some of it in small bills, and there were only a few dollars left in his roll.

Cobb played cautiously. He folded early, took no chances, and after an hour had passed he still had a little more than five hundred dollars in front of him. Halliday still was losing.

Tom Haley sent out for sandwiches and a bottle of whisky and the men chatted as they ate and went on with the game. Halliday merely nibbled at his sandwich. He

watched the fall of the cards alertly, and he lost. His pile of chips dwindled and in one pot, when he had two pairs, he had only forty dollars in front of him and that was all he could bet. But Cobb had three fours and Haley apparently had kings up. They bet against each other, in a pile separate from the pot in which Halliday had put all his chips. Cobb won, and he had eight hundred dollars on the table now. Sandy sat against the wall with his eyes shaded by one hand.

"Say," Jesse Halliday said. "That's about all the dough I brought with me. I could give you a check, Tom."

"I'd be glad to take it, Jesse, but you know we always play a cash game. That's the rule. If it was just up to me . . ."

Halliday glanced around at the other players.

"A rule's a rule," Tompkins said. "Nothing personal, Jesse, but that's the way we always play. You know that."

"Sure, sure." Halliday brought some papers out of his pocket. "Well, I got something here worth plenty of chips. It's a block of leases down at Lebanon, in Texas. A spread of two thousand acres. I'll put that up."

Two thousand acres, Cobb thought. So he sold off the other two thousand and that's where the money came from. That's the money I got in front of me.

Haley picked up the documents. "Lebanon? Ain't that where you drilled a dry hole, Jesse?"

"It wasn't dry. I went down three thousand feet and I had a showing. Walters can tell you I had a showing."

Cobb said nothing.

"I run out of dough," Jesse Halliday said. "I'm going to take it down another two thousand feet. Listen here, a solid block like this is always worth something. I could sell it to some big company for plenty. I could sell it to the Trading Post Oil Company. They scouted the well, and they were interested enough to talk about bottom hole money."

"It ain't worth anything to me, Jesse," Haley said. "I don't know what the other boys think. Walters, what do you think?"

"I don't know," Cobb said. "That hole was pretty deep and pretty dry. It was thirty-one hundred feet."

"That ain't deep for the Ordovician System," Jesse Halliday said. "A solid block, assembled and title cleared, and the sweetest elevation you ever saw. Hell, you know that's worth dough. If I had some cash on me I wouldn't risk it in a poker game, I'll tell you that."

"Of course we don't want to run you out of the game, Jesse," Haley said, and his blue Irish eyes were expressionless. "But still . . ."

Tompkins was examining the leases, his lips pursed. Haley leaned back in his chair. "What do you think, Jack?"

"Well, we could put some sort of valuation on them, with the understanding that Jesse brings in the cash to redeem them tomorrow. We can sort of hold them as collateral and allow him something, say ten cents an acre. How is that with you-all?"

Halliday screeched. "Ten cents! I tell you, I can get a dollar an acre, at least. Listen, I . . ."

They argued back and forth, and Cobb sat back in his chair. He met Sandy's eyes and grinned. At length it was decided that twenty cents an acre would be allowed on the leases. Jesse consented, and Haley telephoned downstairs to the night clerk, who was a notary public, and asked him to come up and bring along a quart of whisky. Halliday made out an assignment of the leases in blank and the notary affixed his seal, and Haley gave Jesse four hundred dollars in blue chips and poured a round of drinks from the new bottle.

The game continued. Halliday won a pot and lost heavily on the succeeding hand. Cobb was careful; he had never played closer to his chest. It had to be a pair back to back or a face card in the hole. He folded time and

time again. Occasionally he touched the medicine man in his pocket.

Then Haley dealt a hand in which every player stayed. Cobb had a pair of sixes wired and Halliday clearly had a good hand, a jack showing. Haley was high with an ace and bet fifty dollars. He was called by every player.

The next card. Cobb's was a queen, Halliday's a ten. Haley bet fifty dollars on his ace and this time Jesse, after hesitating, after looking again at his hole card, after wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, raised fifty dollars. Sampson folded; Tompkins called. Haley did not re-raise, and Cobb sat back with his pair of wired sixes and felt the medicine man in his pocket.

Another card. Cobb's lips were dry and he muttered a curse when he saw a jack fall to Halliday. Tompkins drew a seven to pair the black seven he had showing and Cobb another six to give him a pair showing; for Haley a nine. Jesse looked at his pair of jacks and his face shone wet in the overhead light. He put his hands on his chips and said, "I'll bet a hundred bucks."

The muscles of Tompkins' lean face stood out. Apparently he had three sevens. He said, "I'll chase," and slowly counted out a hundred dollars in blue chips.

It was a good time to fold his three sixes, Cobb thought. He was third man in this hand, he thought, with probably three sevens and three jacks against him. He was sure of it, and yet he called, and squeezed the medicine man in his pocket. And Haley called, proving that he had a pair of aces. There were still two aces in the deck.

"Do you have to have them on the wire to compete in this game?" Sampson asked sourly.

Haley dealt the last card. To Jesse Halliday a deuce; to Tompkins an ace. Haley groaned and said, "My ace," and dealt Cobb his card and it was the queen of hearts.

"Hell, I'm studded," Haley said, and turned his hand without waiting for the bet. "Aces wired, too."

"Queens-up are high," Tompkins said. "Your bet, Walters."

Cobb hesitated, looking at the two pair in front of him. He was going to make Halliday pay. He gave Jesse's hand a careful scrutiny, peered at Tompkins' pair of sevens, then said quietly, "I'll check."

Haley grunted, and Jesse Halliday licked his lips. His forehead and his hands shone with sweat. Cobb took out a cigarette and lit it and his hands were unsteady. Halliday saw the waver of the match flame and the corners of his mouth drew down. "I believe I'll have to make a little bet," he said. "Yes, sir, I'll have to make a little bet. Two hundred bucks."

Tompkins turned up the corner of his hole card and looked at it. He scowled at Halliday's pair of jacks. But he was taking no chances on being bluffed and he called the bet.

Sampson was ruffling the deck, waiting to deal the next hand. Cobb blew out smoke and grinned at Jesse Halliday. "Well, Jesse, I'm going to tap you for your pile. What have you got there?"

Halliday's hands were clenched on the green table-cover.

"Let's see," Cobb said. "Here's the two hundred to call and I'll raise you what I got here—two hundred more."

Jesse's hands convulsively swept out all his chips but three blues and two whites. "You're called."

"Here goes three sevens," Tompkins said, and folded his hand.

"As advertised," Cobb said, and faced his hole card. "Full house, Mr. Halliday. Three sixes and a pair of cupcakes."

Halliday stood up. He turned his hand and showed three jacks and then he picked up the jacks one by one and put them neatly in alignment and tore the three of them to pieces and threw the pieces on the table among the blue and white chips.

"God damn those jacks," he said hoarsely. "I got beat

with 'em every time. Tom, you remember? First I had a pair and then I had jacks-up and I got out-drawn each time."

"That's right," Haley said. "Say, that was the pot of the evening."

"And four wired pair in one hand," Sampson said. "Can you beat it?"

Cobb was raking in the chips and counting them as he stacked them. It came to over two thousand dollars.

"I've had enough," Jesse Halliday said. "Those jacks put a hex on me. Tom, I'll cash my chips." He pushed over three blue and two white chips and Haley gave him forty dollars.

The other men sat around the table in the embarrassed silence that followed a player's going broke. Tompkins cleared his throat and asked, "Whose deal?"

Jesse picked up the forty dollars and shoved it in his pocket. "Walters, what did you come in the game with?"

Cobb looked up. "What's that?"

"What did you start with? Just a hundred and fifty bucks. That was all you had, wasn't it?"

"Whatever I had you'd of been glad to win," Cobb said. He turned sideways in his chair.

"I don't like a game with chisellers in it," Jesse said slowly. "Tom, we ought to keep the game among ourselves."

"Don't be a sorehead, Jesse," Haley said.

"That's the way I feel about it, though."

Cobb got to his feet. "You want to know how *I* feel about it, my friend? I was asked to sit in this game and I sat in. You sold me some chips and I paid for 'em. I didn't get 'em on credit, and if I had I wouldn't of run out on my debt."

Halliday took a step backward; his face flamed in the shaded light. Cobb's eyes opened and he stepped quickly forward, jabbed his left fist against Halliday's shoulder,

then swung hard with his right. Halliday went down, his back striking the wall, his right hand tugging at a pocket.

"I been waiting a long time for this," Cobb said. "Get up."

"Stop it," Tom Haley said. "We don't want a fight." He caught Cobb's right arm, just above the elbow.

Jesse Halliday pushed himself slowly to his feet. He was watching Cobb and he was bent over slightly, his right hand behind him.

"Look out, Cobb," Sandy yelled.

Cobb could not get his arm free.

"He's got a gun," Sandy shouted.

Cobb kicked out with his left foot and caught Halliday hard, in the groin. Jesse gasped and doubled up and Cobb wrenched his arm free and brought his fist from the waist in an uppercut to the side of Jesse's jaw. Halliday fell back and Cobb saw an automatic pistol on the floor. He picked it up.

"Carrying concealed weapons," he said, breathing hard. "Well now, ain't that against the law in Oklahoma? Ain't that attempted assault, too?"

"Let's have that gun," Tom Haley said. "We don't want to have any trouble over this. Jesse, get up."

Halliday opened his eyes. His face was green.

"Get up and get the hell out of here," Haley said. He took the gun and put it on the table; it shone on the green baize. He stepped over and helped Halliday to his feet, and Tompkins picked up Halliday's hat and put it on his head.

"I'll just keep this gun, Jesse," Haley said. "You can come after it when you've cooled off."

Jesse's right cheek already was swollen. He moved in pain, bent over slightly. Haley went with him to the door and Halliday did not look at Cobb again, did not speak. They heard the noise of the outer door shutting and then

Haley returned and said, "He's just a poor loser. Jesse always was."

"It's because I blackjacked him," Cobb said. "I checked and raised."

All the men were on their feet. Haley frowned. "I guess that breaks up the game. Anybody want to play any more?"

"I had enough," Tompkins said. "I'll cash in. One fifty, Tom."

They all began counting their chips, and Cobb stacked his. He had two thousand and fifty dollars in chips. Haley paid off the other men first, then looked at Cobb's stack. "It seems you win Jesse's collateral, Walters," he said. "I believe four hundred dollars was the value we set on those leases. You can hold 'em until Jesse comes around to redeem them."

"You suppose he'll be around?" Cobb asked.

"He said he would, but your guess is as good as mine. You leave me your address so I can get in touch with you."

"I got no use for these leases," Cobb said. "I want that four hundred bucks."

"We agreed to take 'em, though," Haley said. "It seems to me the big winner ought to . . ."

"Sure," Cobb said. "Give 'em here."

Haley tossed him the leases. "And you get sixteen hundred and fifty in cash." He counted out the money, and Cobb picked up the bills, rolled them together in a fat wad, and eased them into his pocket. He lit a cigarette and drawled out, "I enjoyed the game, gentlemen. Any time you want to get your money back just let me know."

Tom Haley grinned. "We'll do that."

"Let's go, Sandy," Cobb said.

They did not speak until they were in the corridor on the way to the elevator, then Sandy said softly, "Lord Almighty!"

Cobb was holding the roll of bills in his pocket. "It was that medicine man, Sandy. I couldn't miss. I knew all along I couldn't miss. I knew that queen was going to fall."

"You were shot with luck," Sandy said. "But what if it was the other way? What if you'd lost Nora's fifty dollars?"

"Well, I didn't lose it." Cobb smiled. "Two thousand and fifty dollars, and I still had eighteen. That's two thousand and sixty-eight bucks. Man, am I in the chips!"

"Take away four hundred," Sandy said. "You got sixteen hundred and sixty-eight, and a parcel of no-good leases."

"Don't quibble over a lousy four hundred bucks," Cobb said. "Boy, let's get drunk."

"It would be against nature to stay sober. It sure would."

They came out of the elevator into the lobby and Cobb led the way to the cigar counter. He bought two fifty-cent cigars and peeled a dollar bill from his thick roll. He looked at the money in his hand.

"Sandy," he said, almost in a whisper. "It's just beginning to sink in. Do you know that I got sixteen hundred and sixty-eight bucks?"

"I'm looking at it," Sandy said. "Boy, stick it back in your pocket."

"It's just like we struck that oil and Halliday paid me off. You know that, Sandy?"

"Cobb, when you hit him he dropped like a sack of potatoes. It was a pleasure to see it."

"He's going to have the biggest mouse you ever seen in the morning. Sandy, I mean I hit him."

"It was the kick I liked best," Sandy said. "Come on, I know a place where we can get it."

"Get what? Corn whisky?"

"Sure."

"No, sir. None of that for me." Cobb looked around

and grinned. "Sandy, I'm going to show you a real drunk. I'm going to get you drunk like you never was drunk before. Let's go."

Cobb walked across to the registration desk. The clerk looked them both up and down but this time Cobb did not mind.

"We want a room for the night," he said.

"A double room?"

"That's right."

The clerk thumbed his small black mustache. "Would you gentlemen want twin beds?"

"Sure."

The clerk thumped a bell and Cobb said, "We're just passing through town. Been looking over some oil properties we got under lease."

"Is that so?"

"I mean we got no luggage with us."

"Oh, yes. Of course, in that case . . ."

"You want it in advance. How much?"

"It's six dollars."

Cobb took out his bankroll and let the clerk see it. He fished around among the fifties for a one dollar bill and a five. A bellhop was beside him and he, too, looked at Cobb's roll.

"Show these gentlemen to six thirty-five," the clerk said.

They followed the bellhop to the elevator and then along the sixth floor corridor. When he let them into their room Cobb pushed his hat back on his head and said to the bellhop, "Sonny, I want you to do something for me. I want you to get me two quarts of the best damn liquor you can lay hands on. Here's a twenty."

"Yes, sir." The bellhop ducked his head. "Yes, *sir*."

Sandy stretched his thin body on one of the beds and grinned at the ceiling. Cobb walked around to inspect

the room: the steel-cut engravings, the mauve-colored furniture, the lavender bathroom fixtures.

"Hot damn," he said. "Sandy, this is it. Don't it beat working for a dollar a day? Don't it? Don't it beat working altogether? Don't it beat sweating out there in the sun and getting so sticky with grease and dirt that it won't come off? Don't it beat firing a boiler and swinging a sledge hammer? Don't it beat just digging a hole?"

"It beats all," Sandy said. "Cobb, ain't he been a long time fetching that whisky?"

Cobb glanced at his watch. "Just two minutes."

"If he ain't back in another five I'll go git some corn. Cobb, he's got your twenty. Reckon he's safe with it?"

"Hell," Cobb said. "I got sixteen hundred and sixty-eight bucks."

"No, you ain't. A buck for the cigars. Six bucks for the room. Twenty for the liquor. You got sixteen hundred and forty-one left, Cobb."

Cobb grinned.

"You could live a couple of years on that, Cobb."

"The hell I could. Sandy, how old are you?"

"Fifty-odd."

"You oughtn't to let yourself get so old."

Sandy sat up. "Just what can I do? I can't turn that clock back."

"What I mean is you're thinking old," Cobb said. "You're pension-minded. Yes, sir, you're pension-minded like an old man. Mention a sum of money and you get to thinking how long you can live on it. Mention sixteen hundred and forty-one dollars and you get to thinking you could live two years on it. Yes, sir, you're pension-minded, Sandy."

Sandy lay back again on the bed.

"But I ain't," Cobb went on. "I ain't thinking how long I can keep going on sixteen hundred and forty-one dollars. I'm thinking what I can do with that money. I'm

thinking what I can get with it and how I can build it up. And the first thing I'm going to get, Sandy, is a front. Halliday learned me that. Look here." Cobb waved his arm. "This here is front. This room is front."

There was a subdued knock at the door and Cobb called, "Come in."

The bellhop entered with a package under his arm. He put it on the bureau and came toward Cobb with the change in his hand. "Keep it," Cobb said. "Hell, keep it."

The boy's teeth shone. He turned toward the door, bowing, thanking Cobb, and Cobb called after him, "Say, maybe you better bring a pitcher of ice water."

"You got ice water in the bathroom, Mister. Just turn the tap there. It's running ice water."

"Okay."

"Lord Jesus," Sandy said. "Running ice water."

He got off the bed and went to the bureau. He opened the package and stood two quart bottles up side by side.

"What kind of drinking liquor did you get? Scotch whisky, it seems to be."

"Pour some out," Cobb said.

Sandy unscrewed one of the bottle caps and poured two glasses half-full. He tasted the whisky and frowned at Cobb. "It's got no body to it. It's thin as an old maid's shank."

"It will get you drunk," Cobb said, and reached for his glass. "Trouble with you, Sandy, is you ain't got a taste for the fine things. You're like a man would rather have fried hen eggs than caviar because hen eggs is bigger."

"I've heard about caviar. Just what is it, Cobb?"

"Fish eggs."

"You're right, then. I'll take hen eggs, any time, fried over with country sausage."

"Bottoms up," Cobb said.

They gulped the whisky and Sandy wiped his mouth

with the back of his hand. "Tastes like scalded water," he said. "Kind of smoky but awful watery. It ain't bad, though. I could grow to like it, but I'd ruther have red whisky, or good yaller corn."

Cobb went to the other bed and stretched out, with the bottle cradled by his side. He flicked the ashes from his fifty-cent cigar on the rug.

"So these is twin beds," Sandy said. "Because there's two of them. Is that it?—Cobb, I been in hotel rooms where there was three beds. Maybe one was a cot, but there was three of 'em. What do they call them? Triplets?"

"I guess so."

"And I been in rooms where there was four beds and more in some of them oil boom towns. What's that, Cobb?"

"I reckon a litter," Cobb said. "You know, Sandy, Tulsa is quite a town. I never liked Tulsa much, but I'm beginning to think it's quite a town. It ain't a place to be broke in, but it's one damn fine town when you're in the chips." He raised up on one elbow. "Sandy?"

"Yeah?"

"I got sixteen hundred and forty-one dollars."

Sandy grunted. "That's what you got at a quarter to eleven on this particular night."

Cobb poured himself another drink. "It will be a long time before I got as little as that again."

"As little as that!"

"I'm just beginning. A year from now sixteen hundred dollars will be just pocket money for me, just in case I run out of smokes."

"Cobb, Scotch don't affect me the same as it does you. I guess I drunk too much corn all my life. I guess my guts are rotted."

"It ain't the whisky," Cobb said. "I'm just getting wise, that's all. Tomorrow I'm going to get a new auto."

"What do you want to dent your roll like that for?"

"I told you I was going to get me some front. Sandy, I've been thinking. This morning I had ninety bucks and in one day I run that up to sixteen hundred and a block of leases worth four hundred."

"Maybe worth that. Maybe worth nothing."

"Just in one day," Cobb said. "I didn't sweat for that money, Sandy. I didn't go out and earn it by sweating and grunting, Sandy, and those guys didn't sweat and grunt for it, either. Sandy, maybe fifty men sweated and grunted for a month to earn that money, and I got it in a couple of hours without a solitary grunt."

"You sweated some, though."

Cobb smiled. "I sweated, all right.—But, Sandy, I'm through with sweating and grunting. I'm through being a sucker."

Sandy was drinking from the bottle now. He took a deep swig and opened one eye at Cobb. "Boy," he said. "Maybe you just begun to be a sucker."

When Cobb awakened the room was filled with sunlight and the curtains rustled in the morning breeze. He opened his eyes to the ceiling and a chromium lighting fixture, and looking at the point of high-light on the chromium he remembered where he was and what had happened and he sat upright with a jerk. Sandy was asleep on the adjoining bed, with all his clothes on. Cobb looked at his own body and saw that he had not even taken off his shoes. Suddenly he shoved his hand deep into his pocket. The money was there.

Expelling his breath, Cobb spread the bills on the coverlet and counted them. There was sixteen hundred and forty-one dollars and some small change. He did not count the change. He said in a soft, low tone, "I'll be damned, damned, damned."

His head was heavy and he was very thirsty. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and one foot struck a

bottle. It rolled across the floor and came to rest against the leg of a mauve Empire sofa. The bottle was empty. He did not need to look at Sandy's bottle to know that it was empty also.

Cobb got to his feet, swaying a little, and went to the bathroom. He splashed water on his face, cupped his hands and threw water into his open eyes. He filled a glass from the ice water tap and drank deeply. Feeling better, he returned to the bedroom and shook Sandy's shoulder. "Wake up."

Sandy groaned.

"We got lots to do," Cobb said. "I'm going to buy a suit of clothes and a Panama hat and a new auto and . . . Sandy, wake up!"

Sandy pushed himself up on one elbow and hung his head.

"Get up," Cobb said. "I'm going down to the barber shop and get a shave. Come down when you're conscious."

"Okay, Cobb."

Cobb put on his hat and went to the elevator. The barber shop opened off the lobby and he found his way to it and sank into the barber's chair. As he was being shaved he listened to a political argument going on nearby. A man in a straw hat and a mohair suit was standing talking to a man being shaved.

"A fella like that in the Governor's chair," he was saying. "It's a crime and a disgrace. It's a shame on this sovereign state. You hear what he's going to do? He said he was going to rent out the Governor's mansion and live in the garage. He said he was going to plant potatoes in the front lawn."

Cobb's barber chuckled. "He's sure against the Governor. He's one of them oil men."

"I'm an oil man myself," Cobb said.

"He's a wild radical," the man in the straw hat was

saying. "He's as wild as they come. You mark what I'm saying, we'll have an uprising before he's out of office. We'll have riots. He don't give a whoop and holler for law and order. It was the tenant farmers and the pore white trash elected him and those are the people he's acting for."

Cobb's barber grunted and slapped a hot towel on Cobb's face. "You know what the feller had to eat while he was campaigning? Just crackers and cheese. That's all he had to eat. Crackers and cheese. How about a facial?"

"A facial!" Cobb snorted, then smiled. "Okay, why not? Go ahead."

"Anyhow," the barber said. "I voted for him and I think he'll make a good Governor. He's an honest man and if he wasn't he wouldn't of had to campaign on crackers and cheese."

Sandy came downstairs by the time Cobb was out of the barber chair. He looked at Cobb and shook his head morosely, and as they were having breakfast in the coffee shop of the hotel Sandy did not talk. He drank three cups of coffee, but ate nothing.

"Come on," Cobb said. "Sandy, I want to buy you a new suit, too."

Sandy shook his head. "I thank you, Cobb, but I got all the clothes I need. And I don't want no part of it. I don't want to see you throw your money away."

"This here is an investment."

Sandy groaned. "I'm going back to that flophouse, where I can get some rest. I couldn't sleep in that whore's dream of a room last night. Cobb, I feel terrible."

Cobb nodded. "All right, I'll see you later."

"Corn whisky never done me like this," Sandy said.

Two hours later Cobb started for the hotel across the viaduct. He was wearing a Panama hat, and on the seat beside him was a bundle in which there were a half dozen shirts and some neckties. And the car he drove was a yel-

low sedan, three years old, which he had bought for the trade-in of his old car and an additional four hundred dollars. It was clean, the dealer had said, and the paint job was new.

He stopped at the post office, and at the general delivery window was given two letters. He recognized his mother's handwriting on one of them and ripped it open as he walked on to the street. His eye caught the phrases stiffly sitting on the rules of the paper like cats on a fence . . . *We have closed the deal with Ardmore Devant. . . . He says we can take our time about moving off, but we both want to get it over with and we're packing up now to move the first of the week. . . .*

In his car Cobb opened the other letter, and saw that it was from Clara. He had never seen her handwriting before. She began the letter *Darling*, and Cobb's eyes lingered on the word. It seemed strange, applied to him; it embarrassed him. She wrote: *No more teaching school for me. I have a new job. I'm going to be a hostess, Cobb, over in New Mexico. I signed up to go to work in a big resort hotel there and I'm looking forward to it. Since we didn't strike oil, I have to travel the best way I can. This ought to be nice. They have mostly college girls and it's not like slinging hash. So I'm going to see a little of the world after all, even if it's not the way I dreamed about. I'm leaving day after tomorrow, and I hate to go without seeing you again. I don't want to admit how much I've missed you. . . .*

Cobb drove on across the viaduct and ran up the stairs to the hotel room. Sandy was asleep, and when Cobb shook his shoulder, his eyes stared a red-rimmed protest.

"Sandy, I got to go home," Cobb said.

"How come?"

"My folks are fixing to move."

Sandy sat up. "Christ, how much did you give for that hat?"

"Twenty bucks."

"Cobb, you're just a fool."

"I'll be gone a couple of days, Sandy. By the time I get back maybe you'll have a job for the two of us."

"If I do I'm afraid it won't pay enough to keep you in Panama hats."

"I bought a new car, too. Look out the window."

Sandy looked down at the yellow sedan and whistled. "What did you give for it?"

"My old bus and four hundred cash." Cobb took two bills from his roll. "Sandy, I'm going to leave a hundred bucks with you."

"Cobb, how much you got left?"

"I don't know."

"Well, count it."

Cobb counted. "Eleven hundred and sixty."

"Is that all?"

"I bought a suit, too, and some shirts and ties."

"Cobb, if you want to leave me a little cash, I'm glad to have the loan of it. But fifty bucks is all I'll take."

"Better grab it while it's there, old-timer."

"I'll grab the fifty. Thanks."

"I'll be back in a couple of days."

"You leaving right away?"

"Sure. Boy, when I drive up home in that bus, in my new suit and Panama hat and . . . Say, I ain't got that suit yet. It won't be ready until morning."

"They'll hold it until you get back."

"No, I want to wear that suit. I'll just have to wait and pick it up in the morning.—And that reminds me."

Cobb left the room quickly and went down to the office. He telephoned the Hotel Territory. No, said Tom Haley, Halliday hadn't been around to redeem the leases. He hadn't heard a word from Jesse.

Cobb went back upstairs. "I guess I can write off that

four hundred bucks. He'll never come around to get those leases."

"Boy, how much money you got left now?"

"I just told you. Eleven hundred and sixty."

"No, you ain't. You gave me fifty. You got eleven hundred and ten."

"Yes, that's right."

"And you owe Nora fifty and Clara a hundred. That leaves you nine hundred and sixty, Cobb."

"Nine hundred and sixty dollars," Cobb said. "Hell, that's a lot of dough, ain't it?"

Sandy groaned and turned his face to the wall.

IO

COBB was smiling, proud of his yellow sedan, proud of his Panama hat and fitted gray suit, as he eased the car over the rough ground and down to the bed of Fossil Creek. But when he raised his eyes to the climbing ruts ahead he suddenly jammed on the brakes. The yellow sedan skidded in the sand and swung around to point at the stepping stones of limestone on which Cobb had played as a boy. The smile left his face and his hands gripped the steering wheel. He gazed intently at the stones, then stepped out into the sand and stared at the bluff. For the first time he studied how the limestone bit down into the earth, how it plunged slanting out of sight.

The plunge of the limestone formation had never before had meaning for him. It had no meaning before he read the book on petroleum geology, before he won the spread of leases in a poker game. But now there had been a flash of understanding and he had seen it. He breathed deeply and put his hand in his pocket. He touched the medicine man almost reverently.

God damn, it's staring me in the face, he thought. All these years it's been staring me in the face. It ain't just stepping stones on a bluff. It's a big formation there under the ground and it's tilted like a soup-plate down into the earth. There was a big uplift once and this is the proof of it!

Cobb moved nearer the cliff. The plunge of the formation, its strike, was eastward, away from the site of the Abernathy well, and on the elevation where the rig stood there was a hogback of limestone on which he had often

sat to eat his supper. He remembered its gray-white color, and he thought that superficially it had the same porosity, the same compaction. Superficially it was the same formation of limestone, and now he was sure it was the same.

The elevation of the hogback was greater than this plunging formation; it was a hundred, two hundred feet higher. Cobb squinted at the face of the cliff. The dip of the formation appeared to be almost due north, dipping from south to north, dipping northward away from the hogback on the hill. If there was an anticline, the Abernathy well should be on the structure. But the rig was nearly two miles away. Cobb took off his coat and tossed it in the car.

I'll trace it through, he thought. I'll trace this outcrop up to the Abernathy well if I can and I'll trace the formation in all directions from that hogback on the ridge and if it dips away on all sides from that hogback—if it does, by God, I got an anticline. For sure I've got an anticline.

He hurried along the creek, moving upstream, following the winding contour of the creek as it traversed the plain and curved westward around the base of the knob on which the well had been drilled. There had been rain again and water rippled over rock beds and backed up in quiet pools. The banks of Fossil Creek were moist gray shale and after he had gone beyond the bluff he saw no more of the limestone outcropping. He walked on. A Hereford steer turned its white face toward him, jerked up its head, and bolted off into the underbrush. He passed a quiet pool where dragonflies hovered, where the water surface was a skim of bright colors along by the bank where the sun was on it.

The close vegetation thinned and as he turned a bend Cobb saw the slope of a bare hill and near its crest a thin ledge of limestone, dipping plainly toward the east. He scrambled out of the creek and climbed the hill to the limestone ledge. He sat on it to get his breath, and found that

his face, his whole body, were wet with perspiration. He turned his eyes to the east and saw his father's house down below. He saw the whirling fans of the windmill, and from where he sat he was high above the windmill. But when he had stood in the creek to study the plunge of limestone the windmill fans had been above him!

Cobb got to his feet and walked on across the prairie. He plunged through a thicket of hogplum and ahead of him saw the gray timbers of the derrick. He pushed on, and came to the hogback of limestone on the hill. It was higher yet than the sloping formation on the previous elevation. He could no longer see the windmill, but he was convinced that it was higher. He was convinced that it was the same formation.

Cobb sat down on the hogback and lit a cigarette. His hands were unsteady. From where I sit I'm on the crest, he thought. That outcrop in the creek would be the end of the anticline there to the east and right here where I'm sitting would be the crest. If I can just find another outcrop on the west, one that plunges the other way, then I'll know. Then I've got the axis of it and I'll know it's closed. But God damn, here I'm sitting staring at the Abernathy rig and that hole was dry! . . . But, still, we didn't strike salt water. If I got a structure that rig ought to be on it, but it ain't as if we drilled into the syncline and hit salt water. Christ, we were maybe only a few hundred feet from the pay when we left off drilling. It could be that. But still, even if I got an anticline it don't mean I've got oil. It might be too flat on top, so fractured that the oil escaped, so steep there ain't room for a pool of oil. And the sand might be too thin, too tight. There was a sea in Ordovician time. I know that. But was it a deep sea? Was it a shallow sea? I got no way to know. I got no way to find out. But hell, I'm in the chips and I can get a geologist down for a couple of hundred bucks and he can tell me. I'll have to do that. I'll have to get me a rock hound.

Cobb started down the hill and pushed his way through the underbrush to the creek. He walked quickly on the soft sand, back toward his car. He came to the quiet pool where dragonflies darted, and passed on. He reached another pool, and suddenly he stopped. On this pool also there was a skim of colors, there adhering to the claybank. He had noticed such skims of color before along the creek, in his boyhood.

He looked around and found a stick of white driftwood. He stepped on a stone in the water and struck at the surface where the colors were. The film separated with the thrust of the stick, then drew together in oily, circular shapes, then united in unbroken film.

Cobb turned and ran upstream. The dragonflies sped away as he reached the edge of the next pool. He thrust the stick and this film also separated and again united. He knew that a film of vegetable or mineral matter would have remained sharply broken, that a film of oil would tend to reunite. The film was an oil film.

Cobb moved on upstream. Above the pool the water ran in a clear, thin stream over gravel, then there was another pool. The water was clear. There was no film.

He turned back. Somewhere between this pool and the pool where the dragonflies hovered was the source of that film of oil. He searched the bank, stepping in the water, soaking his shoes. He came to the edge of the pool where the oil film was and looked closely at the moist, dark shale of the bank. He found a thin intrusion of dark, reddish sandstone, and used the stick to gouge out a lump of reddish substance, almost the color of chocolate. He carried it to the slabrock bed, to a shallow depression that was full of clear water, separate from the running stream.

Cobb put the lump in the depression and the water covered it. He found a smooth stone and crushed the lump against the slab of rock, pounding it, splashing water in his face. He stopped to wipe the water and the sweat from

his forehead and watched the water in the depression as it stilled. Slowly a film was forming and rainbow colors met the sun. He knew then that the substance was asphalt.

Cobb stared at the gray bank of the creek. Asphalt might mean many things. It might mean that a pool of oil had migrated and escaped through the ages. It might mean that the surface of the earth had been lowered by erosion to the level of the oil reservoir and the oil through the centuries had poured out and wasted in the creek. What had old Abernathy said? He had said that you could smell it. You could smell oil along the creek!

Cobb jumped up and started running in the sand. He was out of breath when he turned a bend and the bluff came to view. His yellow sedan stood in the creekbed and Tom Walters was looking at it. Cobb gasped out, "Dad, where's the pickax?"

"Pickax? Why, up to the barn. I . . ."

Cobb ran up the rise to the barn, snatched up the pickax, and met his father on returning. "Come on," he shouted. "I want to show you something."

They went down into the creek and Tom Walters asked, "Whose car is that?"

"It's mine," Cobb said.

He hurried on and his father followed him in silence. They reached the pool where the dragonflies were and Cobb stepped ankle-deep in water and swung the pickaxe against the bank. He struck where the sandstone met the shale; there he dug a hole back into the bank, while his father watched. He chopped away the asphalt that had sealed the pores. He dug out the sandstone and the clay, and there beneath the surface the earth was moist and dark. Cobb put in his hand and gouged out a lump. It felt greasy in his hand. He splashed his way out of the water and put the sample on dry rock. He lit a match and held it near the greasy lump. The flame flickered and the lump smoldered smokily.

"Cobb, what is it?" Tom Walters asked.

"It ain't possible," Cobb said. "But it's oil. I was scared when I saw all that asphalt. I was scared the oil had migrated away. But it's still there, Dad, and that's an oil seep." He grinned and took the medicine man from his pocket, looked at it. "Maybe I'm dreaming. It's too much. All those surface indications and an oil seep, too. I mistrust it. It's just too much. And I know you don't hardly ever find a seep of oil in the Mid-Continent. You just don't. The anticlines ain't that steep and they don't fracture. The general structure is monoclinal and . . . But, damn it, that *is* an oil seep!"

Tom Walters considered. "Son, you've told me nothing. You say that's your car, but you don't say how you got it. You're dressed up like I never seen you. How did you come by all that?"

"By honest means," Cobb said. "And listen here, I got a little cash left over to see that you and Mom are fixed handsome."

"That's fine, son, but where did you get it?"

Cobb grinned. "Gambling."

Tom Walters smiled, shook his head. "I see you still got that gold watch you earned for not smoking or drinking or gambling until you was twenty-one."

Cobb glanced at his wrist watch. "Was that it? I thought it was for not getting caught at it."

They were walking back along the creek. "This is a little hard to figger," his father said. "You mean to say you gambled and won all that—that auto, too? How did you win it?"

"Poker.—And, Dad, that ain't all I won. Another fella in the game was Jesse Halliday, the man who drilled that well here. I won that block of leases off him, or what's left of it—two thousand acres. And let me tell you, I believe I can take and sell those leases for a pretty good sum. I mean maybe a lot of money. I mean enough to buy you the pret-

tiest farm you ever seen and build a six-room house on it and a dozen henhouses for Mom."

They reached the car and Tom Walters went to inspect it. He ran his hand along the nickel, stared at the knobs and dials on the dashboard.

"I know there's oil down yonder and I'm going to sell what I know for plenty," Cobb said. "Those leases are the same as money in the bank." He got in the car. "Dad, when do you expect to move off?"

Tom Walters smiled shyly. "Well, we was ready to go, but you know how it is. We hated to do it and we got to thinking that Ardmore Devant said we could take our time about it, so we put it off for a little. Just for a little."

"I'm glad to hear it," Cobb said. "Maybe we can fix it so you don't have to move at all."

"We've pledged our word, son."

"Well—we'll see. Anyhow I got to go on to town."

"Won't you stay to say hello to your Maw?"

"I'll be back, Dad." Cobb put the car in gear and turned it around. He took the road to Lebanon and drove as fast as he could to Persimmon Street. When he turned into the driveway of the Joplin house he pressed the horn. As he got out of the car he heard quick, light footsteps on the porch, the slam of the screen door. Clara ran down the steps, into his arms.

"Cobb. Oh, Gee! I didn't think I'd see you again for ages. Gee, I'm glad."

"Hey, there!" It was Nora's voice. "What's this?"

"It's Cobb, Nora," the girl called.

"I see it is. But what the hell!"

"Well, I'm glad to see him. Aren't you?" Clara laughed.

Nora shook Cobb's hand rather severely, and Clara cried, "Say, you're all dressed up, and where did you get that car?"

"I came into money," Cobb said. "I'll tell you about it. But first I got a little something for Nora. You remember

I promised I'd collect off Jesse Halliday? Well, I collected."

"Cobb, you never!"

Cobb pulled out his roll of bills and gave Nora fifty dollars. Clara stared at the money in his hand.

"I don't know how you did it," Nora said. "Cobb, I never thought I'd see it."

"Nora, we'll be back for supper," Cobb said. He took Clara's hand and led her to the car. She looked at it, whistled softly. "Cobb, I hope you . . ." She laughed. "Well, I hope you came by it honestly."

"Now I swear," Cobb said. "People closer to me start out to worry if I turned criminal, just because I got some fresh money. What are people who don't know me going to think?"

"The worst. The very worst. Cobb, how did you do it?"

He said teasingly, "Can't you think of a way I could go out and earn it, just by being smart, and honest, too?"

"All that in less than a week? I should say not. How much have you got in that disgusting roll?"

"About a thousand bucks. And wait a minute, some of it is yours. Clara, I sure appreciate that loan, and it was that loan helped me get it. I made an investment."

"An investment? A hundred-dollar investment? What sort of interest rate did it pay?"

"I invested in three sixes and two queens."

"You don't mean to say you won it playing cards?"

"That's what I did."

"Well, Lordy. Well, Cobb. Lordy!"

He opened the door of the car. "Get in." She sat beside him, shaking her head, and as he drove away Cobb said, "I'll tell you something else. Jesse Halliday was in that poker game and I won that block of leases here at Lebanon off him."

"But they're no good."

"Ain't they?"

"Well, are they?"

"I figure I can sell them for something. I believe I could get anyhow fifty thousand dollars and retain an interest in the oil to boot."

"Cobb, you're crazy. A little opulence has gone to your head."

He grinned and turned west out of the square. She touched his arm. "Where are we going?"

"We're going out to find some rocks."

"Cobb, stop the car!"

He glanced at her, turned the car to the side of the road, and stopped. "What's the matter?"

"Just begin at the beginning, that's all. There's been enough of this."

Cobb smiled. "Things are moving so fast it's hard to keep 'em straight in my head. I was in Tulsa and I walked into a poker game and won sixteen hundred and sixty-eight dollars and those leases."

"I thought you said a thousand?"

"Well, I spent the rest."

"Oh, Cobb!"

"It was an investment, honey. I bought me some front, that's all. This car, these clothes." He grinned. "Now don't start taking care of my money for me."

She twisted her shoulders indignantly, and his grin broadened. "Anyhow, I won those leases, and I came back here to see you."

"I wonder about that."

"I did. Soon as I got your letter. When are you leaving?"

"In the morning."

"Why don't you change your mind and stay here?"

She shook her head. "I have my ticket already. I'm packed."

He watched her face, smiling. "I ain't told you the rest of it. Listen here, over on Fossil Creek, where my folks

live, there's a ledge of limestone that bites down into the ground. You remember I explained about anticlines to you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I found a rock hound's dream. That outcrop of limestone and the way it plunges down, a hogback of it on the hill two hundred feet higher and to clinch it all an oil seep. I looked along the creek and I found a place where oil has been seeping out of the bank. So there's oil, and I'm pretty sure I've got an anticline."

"But that Abernathy well was dry, Cobb."

"Then it wasn't deep enough. It could be off structure, but it seems if it was we would have hit salt water. If you drill into the syncline you make a water well sure as hell, because it's the hydrostatic head of that water that carries the oil along and pushes it up into the anticline. Oil is lighter than water, so it goes to the top, and it's flanked on all sides by that water."

Clara's lips were parted; her eyes were very green. "Then if it's true, Cobb, you're rich."

"I'm in a fair way to make some money, all right. But the point is I got to find a formation on the west, sloping the other way, to indicate that I got a closed structure. What I'd better do is get a geologist to look it over and use his report to sell that spread of leases. I tell you, Clara, when they assembled that block up there where they saw there was an elevation, they had something. They didn't know it, but they *had* something."

"But, Cobb, there may be millions in oil down there."

"That's right."

"And you'd sell it for a few thousand dollars? Oh, no. Don't do it. Get that oil for yourself."

"I'd keep an interest in the leases, honey, and hell, I'm no capitalist. I'm no promoter. I'm just an amateur geologist. All I know came out of a book. And I couldn't get up the money to drill a well."

"But you're already down three thousand feet. The derrick is still standing. You could rent tools, the same as Halliday did."

Cobb shook his head. "Sometimes a perfect anticline has no oil in it. The structure may be so fractured that the oil has escaped. There may not be any oil sand at all."

"Cobb, what's the matter with you? You said you found an oil seep."

"Yes, but see here, for a big company it's worth the investment to drill. It's worth the investment to pay a good sum for the leases. For me it's one hell of a risk. I don't want to overplay my hand."

"I don't know anything about poker, but if I had the hand you're holding I'd bet on it. I'd bet the limit, Cobb."

"What can I do? Rob a bank?"

"No. Go to the bank. Talk to Ardmore Devant. Talk to Harvey Fleming at the City Bank. Get together every cent you can and start drilling."

"Well, I'll think about it."

"No, Cobb, you'll do it."

He laughed. "All right. I'll look around one of these days."

"One of these days! Why not now?"

"First of all I got to trace the axis of that anticline, if there is an anticline."

"You can get a geologist for that."

Her face was flushed and Cobb looked at her, his mouth opened slightly. He bent to kiss her, and her lips were stiff.

"Are you going to play hard to get?"

"I'm not playing."

"Oh, well."

"Cobb, do it now. Please."

"But, honey, you're leaving town in the morning."

"That's exactly why I want you to get started, before I go."

Cobb sighed and she smiled faintly. "There's lots of

time until morning, but there's only an hour before the banks close."

"But look here, it's not set yet," Cobb said. "I may be all wrong about it. And hell, I'll just get laughed at. I know that."

He looked at her lifted chin, sighed, and turned the car around. He returned to the square and she waited in the car when he went into the Lebanon National Bank. Pruitt Devant looked through the bars of the teller's cage and whistled softly.

"I want to see your father," Cobb said, and this time he did not have long to wait. Ardmore Devant opened the door of his office and beckoned, and he, too, stared at Cobb's clothes and Panama hat. As they faced each other across the desk there were questions in Ardmore's eyes. Cobb held his hat in his lap and talked with confidence. He said that he still believed there was oil at Lebanon and that he had acquired the block of leases from Jesse Halliday.

"You acquired that block, Cobb?" Ardmore raised his eyebrows. "My boy, I'm afraid you made a mistake. Jesse Halliday abandoned that well out there."

"That's right."

"So I believe the leases are forfeit."

"I believe not."

"Well, I'd have to look up the details, but I think . . ."

"I know," Cobb said. "That was Producer's Form 88 and I know that form. There's a twelve month leeway to start another test before the leases are forfeit, or before I got to pay rent."

"Perhaps you're right. What did you wish to see me about, Cobb?"

"I'm planning to go on with that well."

"You are, Cobb?" Ardmore's eyes opened, and he put his fingertips together. The smile on his face made Cobb angry.

"I'm convinced there's oil there and I aim to drill down until I find it," Cobb said. "Mr. Devant, you remember that ledge of limestone in the creek on my father's land?"

"Yes."

"You remember how it sort of plunges into the ground?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"That's a pretty good indication of an anticline. Ask any geologist. That is, if you can trace the formation and find its axis, and that's just what I done."

Ardmore smiled deprecatingly. "Cobb, we tried to interest the Trading Post Oil Company in the beginning, but they'd have nothing to do with it."

"But they never had a survey made, did they?"

"They sent a man down here to look things over."

Cobb smiled. "I've been holding out on you, Mr. Devant. I found a seep of oil on Fossil Creek, too. I know what I'm talking about, and this can't miss."

Ardmore's eyes now were nearly closed. "In that case, you'd better dispose of those leases, Cobb. If you think you can get anything for them."

"I can get plenty."

"Then I advise you to try to do it."

"No, I'm going to drill myself," Cobb said.

"That's up to you, of course. But you understand that if you can sell them we in Lebanon would a whole lot rather have the test drilled by the Trading Post Oil Company, or some big concern like that, with plenty of capital behind it. That's to our advantage. We get our one-eighth royalty, no matter who drills, and I'd rather have it in the hands of a big, reliable corporation. We've had one experience with fly-by-night promoters."

"I see," Cobb said. "Well, I'm sorry if I took up any of your time."

"Just a minute, Cobb." Ardmore Devant leaned forward. "I suppose you have a written assignment of those leases?"

"Sure I've got an assignment."

"Do you mind if I see it?"

Cobb drew an envelope from his pocket and removed the assignment Halliday had signed. Ardmore examined it, and dropped it on his desk as he leaned back in his chair. "Cobb, I'm no lawyer, but I'm familiar with some aspects of the law of this state. Where it affects banking and the investments of this bank."

"Yes," Cobb said.

"Well, you can't go on with that well Halliday drilled, you know."

"Why not?"

Ardmore smiled. "The Texas courts hold that an assignment which does not specifically describe the equipment on a lease does not pass title to that equipment to the assignee." He tossed the assignment back to Cobb. "I remember once you made a remark about my making a mortgage on a hole in the ground. Do you remember that?"

Cobb nodded.

"So I'm going to have to foreclose on that hole, Cobb, and if you're curious as to how that can be done, it means I'm simply going to pull the casing out of it and sell it for salvage."

"You pull that casing and the hole will cave in," Cobb said.

"I expect it will."

Cobb picked up the assignment and put it in his pocket. Then he looked at Ardmore. "I'll drill another hole, if I have to."

He put on his hat and walked out of the office, out of the bank. Clara looked at him questioningly as he got into the car. "Nothing doing," Cobb said.

"He won't back you?"

Cobb shook his head. "He's working against me. But I'm not going to quit, Clara. I'm getting a little sore and I got an idea."

"How about Harvey Fleming at the City Bank?"

"To hell with the bankers. I tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to Anson North and I'm going to Rob Witter and I'm going to everybody who gave Halliday credit. Then I'll offer 'em a share in my well for that credit provided they extend credit to me." Cobb stepped on the starter. "We'll try Anse first."

They sat in the small office in the North Garage and Cobb had to explain the organic theory of oil, its formation and its trapping in an anticline. He drew pictures to illustrate the nature of an anticline.

"Anson, I'm going to skid that rig and start a new hole," Cobb said. "It will run into money and I've got to have some help. If I can get credit from you for fuel for the boiler it will go a long way, and it will pay you dividends in the end. When we strike that oil you'll get back what you lost to Halliday. You'll have a share in the working interest as well as your one-eighth royalty. But if I sell out to the Trading Post you'll get nothing."

Anson North looked out at the square. He had very broad shoulders and fat arms and he liked to wear polo shirts that emphasized his shoulders and had sleeves wide enough to conceal the width of his arms. His mouth was full and his upper lip long, so that he had a wise expression, but his gray eyes were innocent. He grunted and said, "What do you aim to do, Cobb? Form a syndicate?"

"A company," Cobb said. "The Lebanon Gas and Oil Company. I'm going to capitalize it at fifty thousand dollars, Anson, and if you come in maybe you'll make a fortune. I hope so. And if I go broke, if I can't make a well and go broke, I'm still convinced there's oil down yonder and I'm convinced I can sell that block of leases for plenty, for at least fifty thousand dollars. If I can't make the grade, I'll sell and you'll get your money back. That's why I figured I'd capitalize at fifty thousand—five hundred shares at one hundred dollars each. Anson, I'll give you stock for the

credit you extended Halliday, on the agreement that you'll continue to give credit to the company."

"Cobb, it's too pat," Anson said. "Things don't happen so pat as that. You talk like you expect to have your cake and eat it, too. It seems to me that if you can't make a well you can't sell those leases for peanuts."

"What I was talking about was if I run out of money and can't go on drilling. I mean we always got an ace in the hole."

"You're a good talker, Cobb," Anson said. "But I don't know. Jesse Halliday went down thirty-one hundred feet and he got no oil. Cobb, I'd have to see a geologist's report before I took the gamble."

"You already gambled," Cobb said. "This is a chance to get your money back. But look here, Anson, I'll get a geologist down here. Not no geophysicist or anything like that. It costs too high. But I'll get a good man to look it over. How about that?"

"All right, Cobb. You played fair with me. I remember you told me not to put too much stock in that show of oil Halliday had out there. All right, I'll do it, contingent on a geologist's report."

Cobb took out a notebook and pencil. "Anson, how much credit did you give Jesse Halliday?"

"Altogether about eight hundred dollars."

"Then down you go for eight shares of stock in the Lebanon Gas and Oil Company."

Anson watched Cobb scribble in a small black notebook, and sighed. "Cobb, you're a good talker. I hope I'm not making another mistake."

Cobb stood up. "Anson, I'm going over to see Rob Witter. You want to come along?"

Anson hesitated, then nodded. "All right, I will. I want to see what the others have to say. But remember, Cobb, it's contingent on a geologist's report. And another thing, I wouldn't talk that way about having your cake and eat-

ing it, too, the way you did. It's too pat. Things don't happen that way. You just put your proposition straight, Cobb. You're giving out enough as it is to make a man wonder."

"I got to give an inducement," Cobb said. "Halliday put some hurdles in my way."

"I know I'm a sucker for a gold brick scheme," Anson said. "But they're not all like me. You see, I know I'm a sucker, but I don't care about that. I get fun out of it. —Come on, let's go over to the lumber yard."

In the small office of the Witter Lumber Company Rob Witter listened. He said that Jesse Halliday owed him twelve hundred dollars, and of course he'd like to get the money back.

"We want to skid that rig and use it," Cobb told him. "And remember, Rob, you don't have any land included in that spread. As it stands, it's a dead loss to you, whether or not I sell out those leases. But of course this ain't altruism. I need your help and I don't expect you to give it until you've seen a geological report. That's the understanding. Now if you want to come in I'll write you down for twelve shares of stock on the agreement that you lend the company some money, say fifty per cent of what you've already sunk in it."

"That would be six hundred dollars, Cobb!"

"Rob, I agreed to fuel the rig and it may cost me more than six hundred," Anson said. "It may cost me a lot more."

Rob Witter still hesitated. "Cobb, did you talk to Ardmore and Ralph Paige?"

"I talked to Ardmore."

"What did he say?"

"Ardmore didn't risk nothing but his reputation," Cobb said. "He didn't lay out cash; only his bank did."

"That's so," Rob Witter said.

"What the bank laid out was for casing and Ardmore is going to salvage that casing," Cobb went on. "He told me he'd just as soon I sold the leases to a big company be-

cause he'll get his one-eighth royalty anyhow. But if I do sell, Rob, there's no royalty coming to you. Your money is down the drain."

"The point is, Cobb, I got to set a limit. I don't know as I want to put another six hundred into it."

"Suit yourself," Cobb said.

"Now hold on." Anson North smiled. "Rob didn't say he wouldn't. Of course he don't want to pay out money, and neither do I. Of course it's a gamble, but, Rob, I'm going to take it. That's the way I feel about it. And it ain't on Cobb's say-so, remember. It depends on what a geologist says."

Rob scratched his chin and looked out the window at the stacks of lumber, from which little had been sold that year. "All right, I'll take a chance."

Cobb knew that he had put it over now and he wrote Rob Witter's name in his notebook and grinned at Anson North.

They saw J. C. Hershey next. J. C. had trucked the lumber to the rig and done repair work in his machine shop. He took ten shares of stock and put up five hundred dollars in cash. They talked to Ralph Paige, and he agreed to buy five shares. When six o'clock came and Lebanon closed its business doors for the day there was a list of names that covered a page in Cobb's notebook and eighty shares of stock had been subscribed, all contingent on the report of an accredited geologist.

"Now my troubles are just beginning," Cobb told Clara as they drove to Persimmon Street. "I talked fast and I promised plenty. Now I got to deliver. I got to drill an oil well."

"You will."

"First of all I got to lay out a couple of hundred dollars for a geologist. Those wrinkle chasers cost a hundred bucks a day. And I'm just an amateur. I may be all wrong at that." He patted the steering wheel. "But this is what done

it so far, Clara. It's front, that's all. If I'd of walked in there two weeks ago they'd of throwed me out. They'd of laughed in my face. But people don't laugh at ready money. They don't laugh if you look like ready money and talk big."

At dinner Nora grinned at Cobb and said, "I had a dozen telephone calls this afternoon. The whole damned town knows you're back and they're wondering where you got that car. They asked if it had anything to do with the Abernathy well."

Cobb dropped his knife and fork clattering in his plate.

"Oh, you know how small towns are, Cobb," Clara said.

"Nora, do you mean they thought I made money out of that well? They thought I was in with Halliday and we cleaned up?"

"I guess so, Cobb."

"What do you care what they say?" Clara said.

"I do care. It makes me sore."

"Well, everybody doesn't have your luck at poker, Cobb."

"Poker?" Nora stared at Cobb. "Was it poker?"

"It was a full house," Cobb said.

Nora laughed until her face was red. "You were always lucky at knock rummy, Cobb. I don't know as I want to take you on again."

That night Clara drove with Cobb to the office of the *Lebanon News*. The red brick building which housed the newspaper had been built by the Lebanon State Bank, which had closed its doors in the panic of 1893. The name of the bank was set in limestone letters in the building's clock tower, in which there had never been a clock.

It was nearly dark and a light was burning in the newspaper office and when he parked the car Cobb saw Ed Drum inside with Nancy Jo Paige. Clara went with Cobb to the door, and as he opened it they heard the girl saying, "Ed, it's always the same. Every time we have a date

you've got to come back and fuss around with something."

"Hey, there," Cobb said.

Ed looked up. "Cobb? Say, I heard you were in town."

Nancy Jo Paige smiled at Cobb. She was a slim, goatish girl, with a forehead round as a melon and very large eyes usually half-concealed by lazy eyelids. Her mouth was small and slightly pouted, but there was no petulance in her expression.

"Ed, I got a bottle out in the car," Cobb said. "I'll bring it in."

"Golly, no, Cobb. Not here in the office. If Sweetie found out she'd just about die."

"Oh, Ed, don't be so scared of your mother," Nancy Jo said.

"Scared of her? Of course I'm not scared of her. You don't understand, Nancy Jo, or you don't want to. Sweetie doesn't approve of drinking and it would hurt her to think I did."

"Well, we can go some place else," Cobb said. "Say, Ed, I'm an oil man now."

"You have been for some time, haven't you?"

"No. I was just a tool dresser. Just a worker. I was just a bum who had his body and his clothes sticky and smelly with crude and all I ever got out of it was the stink of it. But now I'm an oil man. I'm a promoter.—Listen, Ed, I own those Lebanon leases and I own that hole in the ground on Abernathy's forty acres."

"Where did you get hold of them?"

"I got 'em off Jesse Halliday, and I'm going to complete that test. I'll be drilling by the first of next week."

Ed shook his head. "But you had a dry hole there."

"My well won't be dry," Cobb said earnestly. "Ed, I'm confident there's a structure and I'm calling in a geologist to look it over. Then I'm going to form the Lebanon Gas and Oil Company to complete the test. I'm going to allow limited public participation in it."

"Limited public participation? Cobb, where did you get all those words?" Ed grinned. "Besides, I think this town has heard enough about oil. This town is back on its heels again and it's the price of cotton that we're worrying about."

"I ain't so sure of that," Cobb said. "Ed, Anson North has come in with me, and I expect he'll be an officer of the company. He's going to supply fuel for the rig."

Ed's eyebrows went up, then he shrugged. "Oh, well, Anson is always mixed up in some kind of get-rich-quick scheme."

"And Rob Witter is a stockholder," Cobb went on smoothly. "Nancy Jo, your father bought some stock, too."

Nancy Jo Paige looked at Cobb with her head on one side; there was a flicker of interest in her eyes. He met her glance and she quickly lowered her eyes.

"Cobb, are you serious?" Ed asked.

"Take a look at this." Cobb tossed his notebook across to Ed. He watched Ed read the list of prospective stockholders and heard his soft whistle. "I'm sending for Sandy Lake," Cobb said. "He's up in Tulsa. And I'm going to arrange for some tools in the morning. I figure we'll be rigged up and drilling by the first of the week."

Ed tapped the notebook lightly on his knee. "Cobb, you know you almost made another sale. Anyhow I'll talk it over with Sweetie." He returned the notebook. "Suppose we print a little piece about the company?"

"That would be a help," Cobb said. "But I don't want you to say I'm peddling stock. I want to hold this thing down to my friends."

Ed laughed. "Cobb, sometimes I can't tell whether you're serious or whether you're the smartest piece of work I ever saw."

"I'm serious now."

"It's so hot here," Nancy Jo Paige said impatiently.

"Haven't you two talked enough business? Let's go where it's cool."

"Let's do," Clara said.

Nancy Jo walked with Cobb to the street and looked at his yellow car. "Say, that's something."

"Cobb, you bamboozle me," Ed said.

"Where shall we go?" Nancy Jo asked. "Lord knows there's nothing to do in this town. Cobb, isn't it *dead* here?"

"It always has been. It ain't any different."

"We might as well drive out to the Point," Clara said.

They agreed on that, and Cobb took the highway south. The Point was ten miles from Lebanon, a cliff a hundred and fifty feet above the river, where a rail fence had been built along the edge. They sat on a boulder near the rim, from which they could see the glow of the waning moon on the river. Cobb had brought the bottle and glasses from the car and they drank the warm whisky straight. Nancy Jo sat on the edge of the boulder, swinging her legs, laughing, gulping the whisky.

"Oh, what a town," she said. "What a place to live. We can't even go and dance, that is, any place that's fun. That is, not within forty miles of here. Cobb, do you like to dance?"

"Yes, sure."

"Ed hates it. He doesn't co-ordinate. Ed, that's the trouble with you. You don't co-ordinate."

Cobb was filling the glasses for the third time and Ed said, "You seem to be pretty well co-ordinated, Nancy Jo."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, don't you think you've had about enough?"

Nancy Jo slid down from the boulder and her figure swayed against the moon.

"It's not soda pop," Ed said.

"Ed, my God!" the girl cried. "My God, jus' because

you never give me anything but a coke you think I'm jus' a . . . My God!" Her voice stopped, but her hands kept talking to the moon. Then she spun around and started running.

"Hey," Cobb shouted.

She was running toward the cliff. Cobb jumped up, but Ed was ahead of him. He sprinted over the rough ground, but before he caught Nancy Jo she turned her ankle and fell sprawling. Cobb turned back.

Clara was pale. "Cobb, you shouldn't give her any. She's just a kid. She can't drink."

"She's as old as you are."

"But she can't drink. Is she all right?"

"She only turned her ankle." Cobb took her hand and drew her down beside him on the boulder.

"She might have run right over the cliff," Clara murmured.

"Nancy Jo is one of those girls is going to be running toward the edge of a cliff all her life," Cobb said. "But she won't ever reach the rim of it. Anyhow, I don't think she's even tight. I think she was just putting on a little scene. I ain't so sure that she even turned her ankle."

"You know a lot about women!"

"Maybe I do. She turned her ankle and she can't walk back, so she and Ed are alone over yonder."

"Oh, pooh!"

"Well, ain't they?" He started to pour another round, but Clara refused. Cobb drank from the bottle. "She just wants to make Ed come to life a little," he said. "She wants to get him away from his mother's apronstrings and make a man of him."

"You have it all figured out, haven't you?"

Cobb grinned. "One thing I figured a long time ago is that women don't act by instinct. They plan everything out. They know just what they're up to."

"I suppose you believe that all women think about is how they're going to catch a man. Is that it?"

"You notice they're still over yonder under that tree."

"Oh, pour me another drink."

Cobb tilted the bottle over her glass. "Honey, how about it? Are you going to tear that ticket up?"

"No."

"Don't be stubborn about it. You don't want to go to New Mexico."

"Yes, I do. I want to see something of the world. I've never been out of Texas."

"Well, it's a big state. If you stayed here we'd have some fun. Things are different now. They're different from when you signed up to go out there."

"What's so different?"

"Hell, we're going to strike oil."

"But nothing is different with us. I'm not so sure you really want me to stay."

"You bet I do. Clara, you're my girl. You're the only girl for me."

"That's whisky talking. No, Cobb, I've made up my mind. I'm going."

"All right," he said.

They sat for a long time in silence, then she said in a low voice, "There's nothing to stay for. Cobb, you know there isn't."

"Maybe not."

"I want to make something of my life. I want to be able to plan ahead."

"Who doesn't?"

She gazed at him and he saw her eyes dark behind faint reflections of the moon. "Cobb, you know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And you don't have anything else to say?" She did not wait for him to answer. "Oh, well, I suppose I want you

to be honest, Cobb, and you are that. You're too damned honest. Maybe you're so honest that you don't know what you feel. Cobb, why don't you try it. Just try saying it. Say, 'Clara, I love you.'"

Cobb frowned and felt for a cigarette.

"Just to see if you feel anything," she said. "Just to see if you can say it."

"Damn it, don't try to stampede me."

"Oh, you don't have to mean it."

"Anything I say I'm going to mean."

"Don't strike poses, Cobb." Her lips curved teasingly. "You know that if it was the only way you could get me you'd do it."

Cobb shrugged. "Maybe."

"Cobb."

"Yes?"

"It *is* the only way."

Cobb threw his cigarette unlighted on the ground.

"I mean that," Clara said.

He got to his feet. "We better go." He took one step forward and called, "Hey, Ed. Hey, you-all."

He picked up the bottle and Clara followed him to the car. He switched on the lights so that Ed and Nancy Jo could find the way, and as they came into the panel of light he smiled and said, "Her ankle seems to be all right. You notice?"

Cobb followed the white road back to Lebanon. He stopped in front of the newspaper office, where Ed had left his car, and Ed and Nancy Jo got out. As she said goodnight Nancy Jo smiled, and her face came alive. Her smile was sly and completely confident, and Cobb grinned back at her.

When they reached Persimmon Street the Joplin house was dark. Cobb turned the car in under the trees and switched off the lights.

"Cobb, will you take me to Aldo Junction in the morning to catch my train?" Clara asked.

"Sure I will."

"I'll wake you then, in plenty of time."

They crossed the lawn, tiptoed into the house. Clara pressed a switch that turned on a light in the upstairs hall and they went together up the stairs. They came to the door of Cobb's room.

"Goodnight," Clara whispered.

"Hold up a minute."

"Don't talk so loud. You'll wake Nora."

"Well, come inside. I want to talk to you."

She shook her head. He put his arms around her and her body was unyielding.

"We have to get up pretty early, Cobb. We'd better say goodnight."

"All right. Let's say goodnight."

He kissed her, and her lips were unresponsive. In the hard light of the hall he could see that her lips were curled slightly at the corners; her eyelashes nearly covered her eyes.

"Come inside," Cobb said. "I've got something I want to say to you."

"You can say it here."

"No, I can't."

She shook her head slightly and started to draw away, but Cobb's arms closed around her. He pulled her toward him, kissed her cheek, then whispered in her ear, "Clara, I love you."

It was easy to say.

II

THE geologist came from Dallas and tramped the hills in khaki pants and boots. He examined the limestone formations and the seep of oil. He measured dip and strike and took samples and returned to Dallas. Four days later he sent Cobb a bill for two hundred and fifty dollars and a report, and when the letter arrived Cobb ripped it open and saw its meaning at a glance. He dropped it and shouted, "Nora, we're in."

The report stated that there were surface indications of a pronounced anticline with its axis running from a point four miles north of Lebanon three miles in a northerly direction and dipping east and west from the crest a mile in each direction. And he had drawn the surface contour of it on a map and Cobb's two thousand acres covered nearly half of it. Whether there was oil, the report stated, depended on the condition of the sub-surface structure and the thickness of the oil sand. And if there was oil it would be in the Upper Ordovician System and it was advisable to drill, the geologist suggested, on a nosing of the structure on the slope of the hill on which stood the derrick of the Halliday-Abernathy No. 1.

Cobb showed the report to Anson North and Ralph Paige and a meeting was called in the office of the Chamber of Commerce. There was a hum of excitement and the scratching sound of fountain pens on checkbooks, and after it was over Cobb deposited \$5,500 in the Lebanon National Bank in the name of Cobb Walters, special account. Then he sent a telegram to Sandy Lake in Tulsa,

and late the next afternoon he drove to Aldo Junction beside the grass-grown tracks of the Lebanon & County Railroad and met Sandy on the afternoon train from the north. Sandy stepped off the last car and waved to Cobb. His eyes were red and there was a day's growth of beard on his chin.

"Looks like you had you a time," Cobb said, and frowned. "See here, Sandy, we got work to do."

"Cobb, what's this all about? Ain't you over-reaching yourself?"

"I don't think so."

"Boy, you can't drill a well without big money. How about your tools?"

"I'm getting a second-hand set out of Wichita Falls. Come on." Cobb led the way to his car, and as they drove toward Lebanon he told about the geologist's report, about the company he planned to form.

"So I've got better than five thousand in the bank," he said. "Sandy, we're all set."

"If you had any sense you'd take your leases and your geologist's report to Wichita Falls and sell out. Keep an interest in it and let some big company drill it up."

"Why should I hand the cream of it over to a big company? No, sir, if there's oil there I'm going to be the one to find it."

"If you can swing it, Cobb."

"I can swing it, all right."

"You got your fuel and your hauling and your rented tools, but you're going to have to pay out for casing and that's what runs the costs up."

"We'll drill with open hole as far as we can. It's a strong formation. It ain't cavy."

"Cobb, your luck ain't that good."

"My luck sticks out all over me," Cobb said. "A week ago I was busted. Now I got money in the bank. I got an oil company. I got a block of leases worth plenty of dough. Sandy, I'm going to play my luck for all it's worth."

Sandy went on with his monotonous inventory of costs. "You got to hire drillers, too."

"I got drillers," Cobb said. "You and me."

"Just one tower?"

"Sure. Dawn to sunset. You and me. I'll pay you off in stock."

Sandy grinned. "I guess you learned plenty off Halliday, all right."

"Well, I can pay you wages if you want."

"If it's all the same to you."

Cobb grunted. "Sandy, I told you before you was too pension-minded. I hate to see you let a chance like this go by. Man, you'd risk nothing but a few weeks of your time."

"I don't believe in my luck the way you do in yours, Cobb. I want security, not luck. All I want is a fair wage for a fair day's work."

"Okay," Cobb said, and smiled. "Sandy, I'm going to make you toe the line, too. I'm your boss, old-timer."

Cobb drove Sandy to Persimmon Street, where Nora settled him in the room he had before, down the hall from Cobb's room.

"Ralph Paige called you twice today," she told Cobb. "He wants you to get in touch with him."

"I'll do that."

"You're pretty busy these days, Cobb. You're getting to be important as a bullfrog. I was reading about your company in the *Lebanon News* and I talked it over with that girl of mine before she went away and I believe I'll buy some of that stock myself. How much is it?"

"A hundred dollars a share."

"I guess about one share is all I can afford, then."

So Nora's name went down in the notebook and Cobb told her, "You understand, I haven't even formed this company. You'll get the stock when it's issued."

"Oh, I trust *you*, Cobb."

Cobb went to town to the Chamber of Commerce. He climbed the stairs to the office and found it empty. Ralph Paige had been president of the organization ever since he had sold out his hardware business and retired, and because of his enthusiasm for the work the chamber was able to dispense with the services of a paid secretary and leave all details to Ralph. In the office there were two desks, and on the walls were photographs of Lebanon, statistics on crop and livestock production and valuation, a picture of a Devant steer that had won first prize at the Fort Worth fat stock show. Cobb was looking at the picture of the sleek Hereford steer when Nancy Jo Paige entered the office. She reached the center of the room before she saw Cobb, and then she stopped and said "Oh."

"Hello," Cobb said. "I was looking for your father."

"He must be around somewhere. He probably went down to the barber shop."

"I guess I'll wait, then."

Nancy Jo had not met his eyes. She asked hesitantly, "Did Clara get away all right?"

"Yes, she's in New Mexico by now."

She went to the window, six feet away from Cobb, and said over her shoulder, "Cobb, I never drank so much before."

"I didn't think you had."

"I mean I'm not terribly used to whisky. I suppose I was pretty silly."

"You were all right."

"You know Pop. If he heard about it he'd just about murder me. Everything I do has to meet Chamber of Commerce standards."

"The Chamber of Commerce has got nothing to complain of."

Nancy Jo smiled faintly. "Cobb, you know Ed pretty well, don't you?"

"I suppose so."

She faced him, and her color was high. "We're going to be married."

"Well, well," Cobb said. "Congratulations, Nancy Jo. I think that's fine."

Her hand met his rather limply. "If his mother will let him," she amended.

"You know it's not as bad as that. Ed has some say."

"Yes, if he'd just say it. If you could just make him say it. Cobb, you'll keep a secret until everything is worked out, won't you?"

"Maybe I'll keep it better than you will."

She laughed. "But don't you think it's a good idea?"

"I think it's fine. Best idea I've heard in a long time. Nancy Jo, you two ought to hit it off just right."

"I hope so."

Cobb lit a cigarette and the smoke hid the speculation in his eyes. She was pretty. A little thin, and lacking in fullness where he liked to see fullness. But there was an intense energy that animated all her body, that made him watch her movements as she turned her head, moved her leg, bent to look out the window.

"Cobb, you've known Ed forever. You understand him, don't you?"

"Kind of."

"Kind of! That's not very satisfactory. But listen. I wish you'd help me. You know the whole situation. You know Ed and you know me and I think you understand us both. Cobb, I'd like to have a long talk with you some time."

"All right."

"Why don't you drive by the house some evening?"

"You bet. I'll come around with Ed some time."

Her nostrils widened slightly and her eyes protested. They were very blue eyes, he saw, and her hair was a golden brown, smooth and straight in the way he liked it. She said, "You know that isn't what I mean. I don't want Ed along when I take my back hair down."

"Okay," Cobb said. "I'll come around pretty soon."

"Say Monday?"

Cobb shook his head. "I got to start work on a well. Better make it a week from Monday."

"I'll be on the gallery. Just honk and I'll come out." She glanced out the window. "Here comes Pop now." She turned and smiled. "A week from Monday, then."

Ralph Paige entered, saw Cobb, and called out, "I've been trying all day to get you."

Ralph was small, as his daughter was. He had very small hands and feet and he liked to sit in his swivel chair and swing his feet clear of the floor. His face was long and gray and his dark eyes, beneath heavy eyebrows, were at peace with everyone. "Cobb, I want you tonight," he said. "Are you free?"

"Yes."

"Good. That's good." Ralph looked at his watch. "The Rotary Club is having a barbecue down on the river and I want you to come out with me."

"Why, I appreciate it, Ralph." Cobb was surprised and pleased.

"I promised to get out there early and help out, and it's about time to go now."

"I'm ready," Cobb said. "Nancy Jo, how about you?"

She turned from the window. "I hadn't thought about it."

"Why don't you, hon?" Ralph asked eagerly. "It's been a long time since you came to one of our functions. It will cheer you up."

"Cheer me up?" Nancy Jo cried. "Pop, what makes you think I need it?"

"Well, you've been moping around the past day or two."

"Have I? Well, it's just the end of summer. You know how it is—the end of summer."

Cobb smiled, and Ralph said, "Hon, I wish you'd just come on out with Cobb and me."

"I'm not dressed, Pop."

"You look all right. You look fine."

"She's coming," Cobb said.

Nancy Jo turned her slow smile to Cobb; her blue eyes were half-closed. "Yes, I am."

Ralph looked at his watch. "Then let's go."

They went in Cobb's car. The Rotary Club maintained a summerhouse on the bank of the river, on a table of land where the underbrush had been cleared and strings of lights run among the trees. There was a stone barbecue pit near the river bank, and inside the house were long tables enclosed by screens.

"Pop loves these barbecues so much, that's the only reason I ever come to them," Nancy Jo said after Ralph had gone to the pit and put on his apron. "Ed likes them, too."

"Where is Ed tonight?"

"Oh, he'll be around. I said I wouldn't come, but he has to. The newspaper, you know."

"It's pretty nice to be a newspaper editor."

"What's nice about it? Ed works like a slave and takes orders from Sweetie. Whatever she says he does."

"What I mean is he has a sort of special place in the community. He can talk out in print whenever he wants to. People got to do him favors. I mean they got to respect him."

"They respect his mother, but I don't know about Ed."

Cobb lit a cigarette. "Nancy Jo, it seems to me you talk Ed down a lot, for a girl who's . . ."

"Talk him down! Cobb, you know I don't mean that. I'm just trying to get some sense into Ed. I'm trying to make him stand on his own feet."

"Why don't you take him as he is? You can't change Ed."

She smiled fleetingly and turned away, and in turning she seemed to leave her eyes behind; she left Cobb remem-

bering the quick, speculative thrust of her dark blue eyes, the lazy lift of the eyelids.

Cobb stood alone on the riverbank and watched another car come in under the trees. Ardmore Devant and Jan got out of it. She wore a sports dress, and that alone set her apart from the other women, who were dressed in summer party clothes, whose exactly placed hair showed that the Modern Beauty Shoppe had done a thriving business that day and that these were the women who had been seen on the square that morning with their hair pinched flat by bobby pins. But Jan Devant could afford to be as different as she pleased, and the way she walked, with her head back and her hair in a haphazard bob, showed that she knew it. She came straight toward Cobb.

"Cobb, I'm displeased with you. Why didn't you come tell me all about it?"

"About what?"

"About what!" Jan opened her eyes wide; her slender fingers made precise gestures in the air. "Cobb, I remember when you confided in me. I can remember when I was a little sister and you told me everything. But now you come back like Joseph from Egypt and I hear about it second-hand." She smiled and touched his arm lightly. "You know, I'm proud of you."

"You wouldn't be if you knew the facts."

Her eyes brightened. "Well?"

"I don't believe I'll tell you. I'd rather you was proud of me."

"Heavens, what have you been up to?"

"I think I'll let it go at that. Yes, I'm going to be mysterious about it."

"That's not in character at all. You're about as mysterious as a—as a hoe."

Cobb smiled sourly. Nancy Jo returned then, bringing two tin plates. Her glance went swiftly from Cobb to Jan. "Jan, I didn't think you still came out to these barbecues."

"Sometimes. Father likes me to."

"That's why I'm here, too." Nancy Jo glanced around her. "Didn't Pruitt come?"

"No, he's busy at the bank tonight. End of the month."

But Ed Drum had arrived and his sallow face was severe as he looked at Nancy Jo. He said to Cobb, "Say, you did pretty well to persuade Nancy Jo to come to one of these things."

"It wasn't me," Cobb said. "Ralph made her come."

They stood in line to pass by the barbecue pit, and then carried their filled plates into the summerhouse and found places at one of the long tables. Ardmore Devant sat across from Cobb and his hard eyes met Cobb's. "I've been hearing a lot about your activities, Cobb. I never knew you had the makings of a financier in you."

"Cobb is full of surprises," Jan said. "Really, Cobb, I can't get over it. You look as if you'd stepped out of a bandbox."

Cobb was pleased, and he was careful not to spill any of the barbecue sauce on his clothes.

"They tell me you formed an oil company, Cobb," Ardmore said.

"That's right."

"There are always people who'll buy stock in a gold mine or an oil venture." Ardmore's smile was thin and unpleasant. "You know, I've had some of the clients of the bank come in and ask my advice about investing in your company. But I can't give any advice unless I know the facts, Cobb."

Cobb put down his knife and fork. "The facts are that I'm drilling an oil well and I hope to hit the pay. That's all there is to the facts."

Jan broke in. "Let's don't talk business. Father, eat your barbecue and just hush up."

Later Jan drew Cobb aside to smoke a cigarette in the concealment of a liveoak tree. "Cobb, you know how

Father is. There's nothing I can do. He's set against you and he and Pruitt are both saying that you're not reliable—financially, of course—and that one experience was enough, and that the test ought to be completed by a big, reliable corporation like the Trading Post Oil Company. They're saying that you're sure to go broke."

"Well, thanks for telling me," Cobb said.

"But, Cobb, I admire you for trying to do something on your own. There's one member of the Devant family who doesn't think of you as an upstart."

"Upstart?" Cobb said.

"I shouldn't have said it that way, but . . ."

"But that's what they're saying?" Cobb laughed shortly.

"Well, I don't mind. I guess I am an upstart." He gazed across at the opposite bank of the river. "You're damned right I've started up," he murmured.

"Where is Clara Joplin?" Jan asked.

"She's in New Mexico. Got a job out there."

"Has she? I hadn't heard."

"She left just the other day. She's working in some big hotel."

"I always admired Clara," Jan said. "She has a lot of spirit in her."

Ardmore Devant came out of the summerhouse, letting the screen door slam behind him. He saw Jan under the tree with Cobb and strode forward. "Don't you think it's about time we started home, Jan?"

"Whenever you're ready, Father."

Ardmore looked at Cobb. "I suppose your folks will be moving off pretty soon?"

"In a week or so, I think."

"They'll be comfortable on that Simmons place. It's a good farm—when it rains, of course."

"You can't tell," Cobb said. "Maybe I'll set 'em up in town one of these days."

"You're banking on that oil well, are you?"

"You bet I am."

Ardmore smiled his thin smile. "I hope you won't be disappointed. Jan, shall we go?"

"All right.—Cobb, I'll stop by some time and see how you're making out."

Cobb nodded and watched them walk away. He heard his name called, and turned. Ed Drum beckoned to him.

"Cobb, do you mind if I take Nancy Jo home?"

"Well, she's your girl, ain't she?"

"Sometimes I think she is.—Are you, Nancy Jo?"

She laughed lightly. "I'm Cobb's girl tonight. He brought me here, Ed."

"Say," Cobb broke in. "That's all right if you want to go with Ed."

Nancy Jo called to her father. "Are you ready, Pop?"

"Yes, I was just looking for you and Cobb. Let's go."

"So long, Ed," the girl said.

So Cobb took Nancy Jo home, and Ed went alone to his car. On the way to town Ralph Paige asked, "Cobb, when are you going to start drilling?"

"Soon as we skid the rig."

Ralph grunted. "I was talking to Ardmore tonight."

Cobb's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Then I know what he told you. He told you he didn't think much of my company. He told you I was operating on a shoe-string and it would be a lot better if it was in the hands of the Trading Post Oil Company or some big, strong company like that."

"As a matter of fact he did say something to that effect." Ralph shook his head slightly. "I've always said that Ardmore wasn't civic-minded. He's too much the banker. I told him tonight that it was a Lebanon enterprise and it ought to have our support."

"Thank you for that, Ralph."

The Paige house was Lebanon's mansion. Ralph had made a good deal of money feeding cattle on leased land,

and he had built the house during the war boom. It stood on a knoll, but was almost hidden from view by native pecan trees, so that the magnificence of the tall white Corinthian columns did not come to view until the driveway opened out of the trees.

When Cobb stopped the car in the drive, beside a walk flanked by a precise box hedge, Nancy Jo said, "Why don't you come in a minute? I'll make some lemonade or something."

Ralph smiled. "You won't mind if I go up to bed, Cobb? You two can sit up if you want."

Ralph said goodnight and went into the house, and Nancy Jo led Cobb to a double rocking chair on the dark gallery. As they sat down a car passed slowly on the street below, its lights shining on the tree trunks.

"It's Ed, of course," Nancy Jo said, and giggled.

Cobb watched the tail lights pass from sight. "Nancy Jo, your technique is a little rough, ain't it?"

"My technique? What do you mean, my technique?"

"I mean your technique of shaking him loose."

She drew in her breath. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean from his mother. Shaking him loose from Sweetie."

"Oh.—Yes, but isn't that the way to go about it? Don't you think I've got to make him act for himself? I have to worry him a little."

"Maybe so," Cobb said. "But it's rough. He looked pretty sick about it."

"Oh, well." The girl was silent for a moment, then she asked softly, "Cobb, do you really want some lemonade?"

"Lord, no."

She sighed. "I wish I had something stronger for you."

"I don't want anything."

They were near together in the double rocker, and her thigh was warm against his. The air was heavy in their lungs and there was the penetrant perfume of night lilies.

Nancy Jo began to rock; she could never remain still for long. Cobb felt the play of muscles in her leg.

"Say, it's about time I started home," he said.

"It's still early."

"Is it? I haven't any idea of the time."

"It's around ten o'clock."

"Then I better go. I've got an oil well to drill."

Cobb stood up and Nancy Jo sighed and stood beside him. He put out his hand, but hers was not there. His hand touched her waist and she was very near him; her body was lightly touching his. Cobb let his hat fall to the floor. His arms went around her and he crushed her tightly, kissing her. Her lips were parted, her fingernails cut into his arms.

Overhead there were footsteps, and a light was switched on in the sleeping porch. They both stepped quickly back and Cobb's arms dropped to his sides. Nancy Jo looked at him intently. She was breathing quickly through loosely parted lips and her lipstick was smeared. She looked disheveled in the dim light.

"I guess now I better go," Cobb said uncertainly.

She did not speak and he bent to pick up his hat. When he straightened she said evenly, "Pop will be asleep in two minutes. He drops right off."

As if she had signaled the light went off on the sleeping porch. But Cobb had backed away, had reached the steps. She followed him, and in the pale light from a street lamp he saw her lips curving in a smile, her eyelids drooping. "I'll see you a week from Monday, Cobb. That's a long way off."

"A week from Monday," Cobb said. He turned and went down the steps.

When he reached his car in the driveway Cobb looked back; she was still standing on the gallery.

I2

COBB hired labor in Lebanon to dig a foundation on the slope below the Abernathy well, at the corner of the old Negro's forty acres, and to skid the rig. They set up the old cotton gin boiler again and rigged the derrick with second-hand tools rented in Wichita Falls. There was no ceremony when this well was spudded in at dawn.

Once again the engine throbbed on the hillside, the band wheel turned, the pitman resumed its parabola and the walking beam squeaked up and down on the Samson post, directing the action of the drilling tools in the earth below. They spudded in at dawn and worked through until the swift twilight veiled the plains.

During that first day there was a small crowd at the rig and late in the afternoon Cobb recognized a bony sorrel horse pacing slowly along the road. Tom Walters dismounted, and this time he led the horse up to the rig and stood in the grass, watching, grinning at Cobb.

"Son, it makes us mighty proud," he said.

"Yes, sir," Cobb said. "Dad, we make an oil well and we'll buy us a farm like you never seen. Electric lights and plumbing and tractors and a big porch where you can set and watch other men do the work. That's the way it's going to be."

It was different now for Cobb. This was his well. This was the Cobb Walters-Abernathy No. 1. He no longer minded the heat of the boiler or the ache of his muscles. He washed the cuttings with special care and dumped them to dry on the rig floor. He filled the small white

sacks, labeled them, and hung them like moneybags on the hooks above the lazy bench.

There was a change and Sandy noticed it. Cobb watched his every action; he was always busy around the rig. And there was no jug of whisky in the shed at the Walters-Abernathy No. 1. There was no drinking at the rig, and Sandy grumbled.

As the days passed people from Lebanon who had invested in the company came out to watch the work. Anson North was one. He sat on the lazy bench for an hour, and followed Cobb out to the boiler. His comment was, "You sure burn plenty of fuel on this rig."

Cobb smiled. "Anson, you ain't regretting your investment, are you?"

"I never regretted any chance I ever took, Cobb. I told you I get a lot of fun out of it. But people are saying that a big company could develop this area best."

"They're parroting Ardmore Devant," Cobb said.

"Yes, I know. Ardmore feels pretty strong about it, and what he says carries a lot of weight in this town. It always has. But as I told you, Cobb, I cast my die, and I'm with you in this."

Cobb grunted and walked back to the derrick. If even Anson North had misgivings, he knew how the rest of the town would react. He had sold only a few shares of stock since the first day's enthusiasm. He had counted on Ed Drum to invest, but one afternoon Ed arrived at the rig, watched the motion of the walking beam, watched the bailer being run, and asked the questions that Cobb had come to expect.

"Nothing yet," Cobb said. "We're just banging away down there, Ed."

"I sure hope you strike it, Cobb." Ed hesitated. "I had a talk with Sweetie, and she doesn't feel she wants to sink any money in an oil well."

"Sure," Cobb said. "That's okay."

"You know how conservative Sweetie is, Cobb."

"It's all right. I told you I wasn't peddling stock." Cobb walked away from Ed's explanations.

That was Saturday. On the following Monday when he went with Sandy to the rig there was water in the hole. They bailed and drilled a screw and the hole was flooded. Cobb telephoned an order for ten-inch pipe to case off the water sand, and that afternoon he sat with Sandy on the porch of the Joplin house, drinking from a jug that Sandy had bought from Jack Vibart.

After dinner Cobb filled a quart bottle from the jug. He bought ginger ale and a container of ice, and at eight-fifteen he stopped his car in the driveway opposite the Corinthian columns of the white house on the knoll. The twilight had faded into the trees and it was just now dark. Cobb sounded the horn, and Nancy Jo came down from the gallery at once. He heard her quick steps on the cement walk and even in the darkness he could identify her quick movements, the sway of her slim body. He held the door open.

"Hello there, Cobb." Her voice sounded deep in her throat.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

"No." She settled herself beside him, and in the dashboard light he could see one knee, silk-covered. She had been to the beauty parlor that day and her hair was too precisely arranged, giving prominence to her forehead that was as round as a child's.

Glancing at her, Cobb remembered Nancy Jo years ago in high school. He had been several years older, sufficiently her senior to watch her with amusement. Her eyes had always been open very wide, before they acquired the present studied droop, and the rounded shape of her forehead had given her a boyish appearance. At dances, in the plank and sawhorse stands at football games, she had never been contented with the boy who was her escort. She had

always been dashing away, calling another boy's name, behaving as if she had some mysterious secret to share with him.

As he drove away, Cobb asked, "Where to?"

"I don't care. Let's just drive out where it's cool. Under the stars."

"All right. Under the stars. How about the Point?"

She shook her head. "That's where everybody goes. Let's just roam around.—Cobb, did you see Ed today?"

"No."

Nancy Jo laughed softly. "He knows I have a date to-night, but I wouldn't tell him who it was. He was crazy to find out."

Cobb turned north of town, crossed the river bridge, and drove on into the plains country. The road climbed a bald hill and on the right there was a gate in the barbed wire fence. He stopped the car. "Let's go out in that pasture. You can see for miles from that hill."

"All right. Whose land is it?"

"Ardmore Devant's."

After passing through the gate of barbed wire Cobb followed wagon ruts that led along the slope to the feed bins. He stopped the car near the top of the hill. Below them, five miles away, was the string of lights of Lebanon. A strong breeze blew over the hill and ruffled the tall feathers of grass.

"Yes, it's nice here," Nancy Jo said.

"Want a drink?"

"Oh.—Did you bring something?"

"I'm loaded down, but it's only corn."

"I'll have just a small one, a very small one."

He brought out the bottle, the glasses, the ice.

"We'll make a mess," Nancy Jo said. "We'll spill it all over your beautiful car. Cobb, we'd better sit on the runningboard."

"Sure thing."

He put the bottles on the runningboard and there was little room to sit. Nancy Jo was talking steadily, and her teeth showed in the starlight. Cobb took out a cigarette and lit it, and Nancy Jo turned her eyes away from the glow of the match, then bent over and began fishing pieces of ice out of the container and putting them in the glasses. Cobb poured the whisky and opened ginger ale.

"I believe I'll get the back seat out," he said. "We got to have a place to sit."

Nancy Jo did not speak; she was pouring ginger ale into the glasses. Cobb removed the seat and put it in the grass two yards from the car. Nancy Jo handed him a glass and said casually, "Yes, this is better." She sat down on the cushion and Cobb let himself down on the opposite end.

The stars were so bright that they could see each other clearly. They could see the shapes of the grass stems near at hand, the shadowy posts of the fence down below. Nancy Jo stretched out her legs and Cobb could even see the wrinkles on the knees of her silk stockings.

"Cobb, I want to know," Nancy Jo began. "Do you have a low opinion of me?"

"Why should I have?"

"I don't know. Because I say things I shouldn't. Because I do things I shouldn't. Because I don't cover up. Because I come out here on the prairie and drink corn whisky. Do you?"

"I like a woman to say what she means and act like she feels," Cobb said.

"Oh, but I don't, Cobb. That is, not usually. But with you it just comes out of me. I don't stop to think about it."

"You and me are sort of two of a kind," Cobb said. "We're wise to each other." He dropped back on his elbow and looked at the Dipper, tipping toward the northwest horizon.

"I wonder," Nancy Jo said. "I think I kind of shock you."

"What an idea." Cobb laughed. "Listen here, don't you think I see the way you sip that corn? Like it was castor oil."

She gulped some of the whisky. "But you don't like women to be frank, do you? You like them shy and sweet."

"Well, you're kind of sweet," Cobb said. "But I don't know about shy."

"I'm not." She shook her head, and moved nearer him. He could see the dark smear of her lips in the starlight, the black droop of her eyelashes. "Cobb, aren't you going to kiss me?"

"Let's get this straight," Cobb said. "Nancy Jo, Ed is a friend of mine and you can't just play with me. I don't play."

Nancy Jo threw her glass down and the corn whisky spilled on the grass. "Cobb, you make me so mad! What has Ed got to do with it?"

"Well, as I remember it, the reason we're out here is because you wanted to talk to me about Ed. I don't know why."

"Oh, that."

"And as I remember it, you said you and him were going to get married."

"No, we're not."

"No? You told me you was."

"Look, Cobb," Nancy Jo said. "Look, it's the harvest moon."

It slid slowly to view, huge and perfectly round and a pale pink color as it lifted above the horizon. "Such a night," Nancy Jo said, and picked up her empty glass. She poured more whisky in it and drank the liquor straight. "Cobb, you're right. We *are* two of a kind, and you're the only person I can really talk to. You're just as uncivilized as I am."

"Maybe so." Cobb got to his feet. "Ain't it getting kind of late?"

Her small mouth was pouted. "Cobb, you're always running away. It's always late. It's always time to go home. And it isn't late at all. It's early, and it's a beautiful night."

"It is that. I believe this is the coolest spot for miles around. You know, some day I'm going to build a house on a hill like this, with a view like this and a breeze all day long."

Nancy Jo sighed. "Cobb, I don't want to be just what I'm expected to be, just tailor-made by the Chamber of Commerce. Cobb, we only live a little while and I'm not going to fill up my time with moralizing and conventions, just because it's expected of me. Just because I'm a girl. I want to get what I can out of living."

"You don't have to rush at it, though, like you was running off a cliff. It will come to you." Cobb smiled. "It seems to me that all the girls in Lebanon are just busting open to raise hell. There must be something about this town."

"It's so dead," she said. "Cobb, I want to live. I want to feel I'm living and that I'm not wasting anything. I even like pain. I don't care if I hurt myself because when I feel pain it means something. I'm feeling my body. It's there. It's me. I'm knowing it and I'm loving it, even in pain. I don't want to waste even a toothache. Don't you see?" She rose to her feet. "Cobb, are you going to kiss me?"

"Now, listen." Cobb's laughter was forced, and he felt rather foolish. She stood looking at him with her arms limp at her sides, the palms turned forward, with her head raised.

"You're damn right," Cobb said roughly, and his hands caught her shoulders. She was smiling as he kissed her, and he drew back.

She still stood there, with her face pale in the light of the harvest moon, her eyes closed. Cobb took out a cigarette and lit it, and her eyes opened at the flare of the

match. She looked at him and whispered, "What's the matter?"

"Sit down," Cobb said.

She kicked at a stone and sent it flying. "Damn you, Cobb."

"Sit down."

She dropped to the cushion and picked up her glass. Cobb looked down at her, and he thought that she was very young, that she had dramatized her freedom and that she was really a little frightened. He felt that he should lecture her.

She was silent for a moment, then she said softly, in a tone that had been carefully considered and shaped and released from her lungs like steam under control, "Cobb, you make it all so kind of sinister. There's no harm in petting."

"I'm just a country boy," Cobb said. "I don't know about that. But look here, you've got to stop prodding beehives, just to see if it's true bees got a sting."

"Perhaps I do do that." Her tone was warm and pleased.

"It's exactly what you do. See here, you can't make a guinea pig of everybody you meet."

"Cobb, I don't!"

"Yes, you do. And you make a guinea pig of yourself, too."

Nancy Jo stretched her arms with an air of contentment, pleased at being the subject of analysis, of whatever sort. He was amused and said quietly, "Nancy Jo, how old are you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I just wondered."

"Well, I pay my poll tax."

"That's old enough to have some sense of responsibility."

"I like that!" the girl cried. "Quit being noble, Cobb. It's not in character. It's just stuffy."

"How about Ed Drum?"

"Ed is just an excuse. You just make him an excuse. Quit

pretending and pour me another drink." She watched him as he reached for the bottle. "You don't fool me, Cobb. You said we were two of a kind and I think that's true."

He smiled and poured the whisky. The ice had melted away and the ginger ale was warm. "You're a funny girl. I don't think you're as sure of yourself as you make out. And I think you're pretty much in love with Ed."

"No, I'm not," Nancy Jo said. "I'm frank, Cobb, and you're not." Her voice was cocksure again.

Cobb picked up the bottle of whisky and kicked the ginger ale bottles off into the grass. He reached down and took the girl's hand. "We're going back to town," he said, and pulled her to her feet.

He picked up the cushion and returned it to the car. When he switched on the lights he saw Nancy Jo smiling. She moved into the front seat beside him with an air of docility. Cobb drove to the pasture gate, and as they went along the white road among the dusty sunflowers he smiled and said, "I was remembering. You went down to the university, didn't you?"

"Yes, for two terms."

"And what you learned there was a good line, and now you had a chance to try it out on a country boy. Is that it?"

Nancy Jo laughed. "Oh, Cobb, you're so simple."

"It's true, though."

"Cobb, if anybody has a line, it's you, and your line is nobility. Clean-cut, homespun boy. But it doesn't fool me."

They came to the public square and the hands of the courthouse clock stood at eleven. The clock was striking as Cobb turned into the driveway of the Paige house. He stopped and left the engine running.

"Cobb, I don't want to go to bed," Nancy Jo said.

"It's past eleven."

"Don't worry. I'm going." She laughed softly and turned

up her face. He kissed her, and her lips clung to his; her moist palm touched the back of his hand.

Cobb drew back. "Goodnight, Nancy Jo."

She got out of the car, smiling. "You're sort of sweet, Cobb. You try to be a good boy, don't you?"

Her smile was fleeting, and now she seemed pale in the faint dashboard light. "Cobb, when are you coming to see me again?"

"I'm pretty busy. I've got to drill an oil well, and I . . . I'll be around again, Nancy Jo."

She lifted her chin. "Maybe I've scared you off."

Cobb grinned. "I'll call you up pretty soon."

There was a slight movement of her head, and her eyes shone in the reflected light. "I'll be waiting," she said in a low tone, and turned away. Cobb heard the clicking of her heels on the walk and then the screen door slammed shut.

13

FIFTEEN HUNDRED feet: limestone, medium hard. Two thousand feet: shaly sandstone. Another water sand and they set casing. They drill on with open hole. Three thousand feet: gray shale.

Autumn breathed its first crisp gust across the plains and the bareness and the brownness of the hills was fitting now. The landscape seemed to have turned brown in its season rather than to have been burned and blackened by the long, hot summer. The first frost came early that year and the first frost always made a change. In the summer the rolling hills of the plains country were bald and glaring, but after the first frost the grass on the hillsides turned warm colors and it was apparent that these hills had been molded with a special caress. And the pecan trees along the river were yellow and the turned soil of the furrows was a rich, deep black.

Three thousand, two hundred feet. Deeper than the Hallyday-Abernathy well had been drilled. Cobb watched the bailer glide out of the hole, studied the cuttings, tasted them. Three thousand, two hundred feet, and they had drilled two more screws. Sandy called sharply to Cobb, "I'm afraid there goes your oil well."

"What's wrong?"

"The hole is about full of water."

Cobb went to look at it. "Well, we'll have to case it off."

"Cobb, you know how deep this hole is? Thirty-two hundred and ten feet."

"Sure, I know that."

"That's plenty deep."

"We got to go deep, down to the Ordovician."

Sandy sighed. "Cobb, you better face it. You're off the structure, if there is a structure. You've drilled into the syncline. You'll never get anything but water out of this well."

"I think different," Cobb said. He went to the lazy bench and Sandy shut down the engine. Cobb sat staring at the water bubbling up to the rig floor, up out of the well. There were watchers at the lease and they came forward to see it.

"It's just a little water," Cobb said sharply. "Stay off the floor, please."

"Just a little water!" Sandy said.

"Water ain't going to stop me. There's an oil sand down below there. I know there is."

"You've got to run casing, then."

"All right. We'll run casing."

Sandy went to the shed and returned with a supply dealer's order book. He thumbed through it. "We got eight and a quarter inch casing now, Cobb. It will have to be six and five-eighths. Here it is. Six and five-eighths. That will come to a dollar thirty a foot."

"Thirty-two hundred and ten feet at a dollar thirty a foot," Cobb said. "Let's have the pencil." He scribbled on the lazy bench. "That comes to four thousand one hundred and seventy-three dollars."

Sandy whistled. "How are you fixed for dough?"

"I got about two thousand left. A little over that, including my own money."

Sandy shook his head. "Keep it, then. Boy, you're done. You've got freight and hauling and labor to run that casing to think of. You've got fifty-odd tons of casing to pay for and handle and you just can't do it. Anyhow, the hole ain't worth it."

"I think different."

"What you ought to do is hang on to what you got and sell off those leases for whatever you can get. Else you'll go bust."

"Then I'll go bust."

Sandy bit off a chew of tobacco and sat beside Cobb on the lazy bench. "It ain't only a matter of going bust, Cobb. You *are* bust. You ain't got enough to buy that casing, let alone haul it and run it."

"I'll have to sell some more stock."

Sandy laughed. "You ought to do what Paul Bunyan did. You ought to hitch a chain to that hole and haul it up and cut it to lengths and sell it for post holes. They say that's what he done when he drilled a dry hole at Breckenridge. They fenced the Panhandle with it."

"Damn it, Sandy, don't you start talking against me, too." Cobb walked away angrily.

Cobb put on the clothes he had bought in Tulsa and his Panama hat and went to the barber shop for a shave. Then he went to see Anson North. He called on Rob Witter and Ralph Paige. They had no more money to invest, they said. They couldn't afford to pour cash money down that hole, they told him.

He met Ed Drum on the square and Ed said, "Cobb, I hear you got a water well out there."

"Who in hell told you that?"

"I deal in news, boy."

"We struck another water sand, that's all. I'll have to case it off."

"Then you intend to keep on drilling?"

"You're damn right."

"Well, good luck to you." Ed tapped Cobb's shoulder sympathetically, but Cobb wanted no sympathy.

There was one other thing to do. He could go to Fort Worth or Wichita Falls or Tulsa and try to sell some of the leases, enough to complete the well. He could show the geologist's report and the map of the structure and he could

talk fast and maybe he could raise some money. He drove to the house on Persimmon Street for the leases and the report, and then to Fossil Creek to see his parents.

As he came up over the rise of ground he saw a wagon at the gate in the picket fence and a palomino horse flicking its white tail at the hitching post.

His father was carrying a chair from the house to the wagon, on which several articles of furniture already had been stowed. Cobb got out of the car. "What's all this?"

"We're fixing to move."

"Then why didn't you let me know?"

"Didn't want to bother you, son. Give me a hand here."

Cobb hoisted the chair to the wagon bed and turned toward the house. His father followed him, saying, "I already moved most of the heavy stuff and I'm coming back after the stock."

Cobb went into the house, and found Jan in the kitchen with his mother, helping to put jars of preserves in a grocer's carton.

"I'm glad you came, Cobb," Ada Walters said. "We didn't want to bother you, but now you're here we can use those strong arms of yours." She smiled. "Jan has been helping."

"It's good of you, Jan," Cobb said.

"I've put a couple of jars in a box, that's all. Mrs. Walters, what else can I do?"

"There really ain't much needing done.—Look, Cobb. Pickled peaches. Them was always your favorite."

Jan looked steadily at Cobb. "I thought you were busy every day. Cobb, is there anything wrong at the well?"

Cobb shrugged his shoulders and his mother looked at him. "Is there, Cobb?"

"Everything's fine. Mom, what can I do?"

"You can take down the bed and carry it out."

Jan followed him into the bedroom, watched him as he

rolled the mattress and tied it up. "What *is* the matter, Cobb?"

"Nothing. I guess I look gloomy because of moving. You see, I was born in this house. I hate to see my folks move out. It's going to make an empty place for us."

"Yes." Jan sat down on the one chair that had not been carried out. "Cobb, I heard you were troubled with water."

"That's right. I'm fixing to make a trip and get rid of some of those leases."

"Get rid of them? Why? Is the well dry?"

"No, it's just a little matter of money.—Jan, I had big ideas, but I was just a little too big for my britches."

She considered. "That's too bad, Cobb.—Did Father have anything to do with it?"

"No."

"But he used his influence, didn't he?"

"Well, you know how bankers are. I guess I don't blame him. I ain't gilt-edged, for a fact."

"Cobb, how much money do you need?"

"Plenty. I've got to buy casing and run it. I've got to case off that water before I go to drilling."

"Is that expensive?"

"Casing is what runs costs up. Over four thousand dollars for the amount of casing I need right now, and maybe more, and I only got about two thousand. I guess if I had any sense I'd of sold out in the beginning." He picked up the headboard of the bed and started toward the door.

She came alongside him on the porch. "Cobb, put that thing down."

He leaned the headboard against the railing and looked at her. Her brown eyes were shining. "Cobb, do you want another investor?—Listen, I've got some money. Cobb, I'll buy some stock."

He shook his head. "I couldn't let you do that."

"I could put in about four thousand dollars. Cobb, would that do it?"

"Would it!" Cobb paused and shook his head, frowning. "It would, Jan, but I can't take it."

"Is it enough for casing and all that?"

"Sure it is. But look here, Jan, you wouldn't be investing the money. You'd be gambling. That water may mean the well is off structure and we'll never drill into an oil sand. For that matter, there may not be a drop of oil down yonder."

"What do *you* think, Cobb?"

"I guess I just hope. All we got to go on is surface geology, and you can't depend too much on that."

"But if you had the money what would you do?"

"I'd run that casing and keep drilling."

"Then you have the money. Cobb, it's yours."

Cobb leaned against the railing, looking at her. He thought that she had never been more beautiful than now, with her black hair framing her face, her eyes wide and gentle, a triumphant smile defining the bold modeling of her cheeks, a smile for him to share. Cobb could not speak.

"You'll take it, won't you?"

He nodded.

She was still smiling. Slowly she reached out her hand and her fingers lightly touched his arm. "Cobb, am I acting like a princess?"

"I never ought to said a thing like that."

"It makes me happy to be able to help.—So we're partners, Cobb."

"We sure are."

"I don't want you to hate all the Devants."

"Jan, you've always been admired in this house. Nobody ever hated you and never will." He could say no more. He picked up the headboard and carried it out to the wagon. She followed him, and the smiles they exchanged were like caresses to Cobb.

"It will take a day or so," she said. "I'll have to sell some

bonds.—But can't you go ahead and order what you need so that you'll be ready to start in?"

"Sure I can."

"I'm going to get busy, then." She unhitched the palomino horse and Cobb held the bridle near the bit as she swung into the saddle.

He looked up at her. "Jan, I don't want you to make a mistake. Ardmore ain't going to like it one bit."

Her chin jerked up. "Listen, Father's not going to manage everything I do. I don't care whether he likes it or not. He's not going to manage me any more."

Her face was angrily flushed and there was a hard light in her brown eyes that Cobb had never seen before. He reached up and took her hand, held it tightly. "Jan, I guess I don't have to say anything else." He was embarrassed. "I can't say it, but I guess you know how I feel."

Her fingers returned his pressure, then she withdrew her hand, turned the horse, and galloped toward Fossil Creek.

Cobb did not tell his parents. He felt an exultant pride that he wished to keep entirely to himself, and he walked on air that day. He drove his mother to the Simmons farm and left her there to put the house in order, then he returned to Lebanon. Sandy was seated complacently on the porch of the Joplin house.

"Old-timer," Cobb said. "We had a change of plans. I got hold of some money and we're going right back to work."

"Lord Jesus," Sandy said.

"What's the matter?"

"Boy, I thought you'd got it through your head that you got a duster out there."

"The hell I have."

Sandy sighed in resignation. "All right, what do we do now?"

"We order the casing and we go to work, that's what we do."

Cobb sent the order and the casing arrived in big trucks and trailers whose wheels bit deep into the roads, softened by recent rains. It was rolled out on the racks, level with the rig floor, and Ralph Paige helped to recruit labor to run it. They floated the casing down, to ease the weight on the derrick and the casing line.

Sandy forced a wooden plug into the shoe of the first joint of casing and lowered it into the water-filled hole. The next twenty feet of pipe was raised and screwed on to the first, and so on until all the casing had been run and landed on hard limestone at the bottom of the hole. Then they drilled out the plug and Cobb paid off the labor. Drilling was resumed.

Thirty-five hundred feet. The drill is in hard black limestone and there is no more water. The pulse of the walking beam continues from dawn to sunset, and from dawn to sunset there are watchers at the well.

Jan Devant drove to the lease nearly every day. The first time she came the casing was being run and she sat beside Cobb on the lazy bench, watching the joints of pipe glide into the hole.

"I want to know how Ardmore took it," Cobb said.

"It's none of his concern."

"When I took and deposited your check in the bank, well, you should have seen the look Pruitt gave me."

Jan's lips tightened. "Did he say anything?"

"No."

"He'd better not."

"But how about Ardmore? How did he take it?"

"Cobb, I thought I made that clear. I told you I wasn't going to let him manage me any more." She smiled. "I can handle Father."

Four thousand feet. The formation is hard limestone still and in this part of the country hard limestone is often the

caprock above the oil sands. There is always a crowd at the rig. They stand and watch and listen to the engine, their heads going up and down with the walking beam.

A farmer got out of his car and strode toward the rig. He stopped a moment to watch the walking beam, then approached Cobb. "I want to buy a stock."

"All right. It's a hundred dollars a share."

"I got the money in my pocket."

"What's your name?"

"Paul Stillman."

The name went down in the notebook and the man counted out the money in fives and tens and silver. Cobb wrote a receipt. And as the days passed there were other names. One share, two shares.

Forty-three hundred feet. They pass the lime and drill into a tight sandstone formation. The bailer comes up with cuttings, fine-grained, and Cobb spreads them on the rig floor. It is sunset.

"Sandy, come here!"

"Well?"

"Smell it."

Sandy picked up a handful of the cuttings.

"Ain't there an odor? Don't you smell it?"

"Yes, a little."

"And that sand is kind of dark. Look at it."

"There appears to be a sort of stain."

"Let's drill another screw."

"Be pitch dark before we can get the tools back in, Cobb."

"Anyhow, let's try it."

"Cobb, don't get your hopes up."

"We may be right there. We may be right on the horizon, Sandy. I couldn't go to sleep tonight. We got to drill another screw."

Sandy sighed. "All right."

Cobb put his shoulder against the bit and swung it over the hole. The bull wheels rattled and shook and the derrick vibrated as the tools dropped away forty-three hundred feet to the bottom of the hole. The band brakes were red hot and the stream of water that played on them rose in steam against the brilliant western sky.

Sandy clamped the cable to the temper screw, turned the telegraph wheel. The walking beam resumed its seesaw motion, and the bit struck deep down below. It was dark now, and Cobb lit a lantern. He put it on the lazy bench and in its light they watched the gleam of the wire cable dipping into the black hole. Sandy let out the screw: one-quarter; now one-half. They drilled a screw.

"Hell, I'm hungry," Sandy said. "Cobb, save your disappointment for tomorrow."

Cobb bent over the hole. "Sandy, do you smell gas?"

Sandy sniffed. "I smell nothing."

"Let's drill one more screw."

"We're seven feet into that sand now, Cobb. Better save it for the day."

"Anyhow, let's run the bail."

"For what? You smell a little something and you'll want to drill another screw. And maybe you won't smell a thing, Cobb. Just old mother earth."

"I could swear there was a whiff of gas." Cobb looked at Sandy's face, then expelled a deep breath. "I guess you're right. Okay."

"Blow out the lantern, then, and let's go."

Cobb blew it out.

14

IT rained again that night. Cobb lay awake and listened to it. He heard the first distant clap of thunder, smelled the freshness of the air, and then he heard the beat of rain on the prairie, heard it sweeping toward him and its hollow roar on the roof above his head. The curtains blew and the rainspray reached his face as he lay with open eyes staring out the windows at the swaying branches of the bois darc tree.

The tree was nearly bare of leaves and its green fruit, as large as grapefruit, weighted down the branches, and as the hard rain came the bodark apples fell from the tree and struck the roof and rolled with a hollow, bumping sound to the eaves. Cobb could not sleep. He listened to the thunder in the black night and he watched the shadowy movement outside his window. Sometimes he dozed, but was awakened by the rumble of the heavens, or the clatter of a bodark apple falling on the roof, and he was awake when gray light came from the east to dilute the black wet shape of the window. He was awake long after dawn when he heard a sharp noise above the thunder, the quick sound of knocking.

Cobb was almost instantly out of bed, before he was sure that it had been a knock on the front door. He yanked the patchwork cover from the bed, wrapped it around him, and went downstairs. When he opened the door he saw a man in the rain and a horse steaming in the faint dawn light.

"Abernathy?" Cobb said. "Man, you're soaking. Come inside."

Abernathy's eyes seemed black and angry. "Look at me," the old Negro said. "Boy, look heah."

"You sure are wet." Cobb looked at Abernathy's black clothes.

"Cobb, cain't you see good? Looky mah han's." Abernathy's voice was a high sound.

Cobb looked at the wrinkled black hands, at the pinkish palms smeared with streaks of dirt, streaks of . . .

"Oil!" Cobb shouted.

"It done wash off some, but she was all ober me, Cobb, all ober me. You remembah I done predic' it. Cobb, you hear me predic' it."

"Sandy!" Cobb shouted. He reached out a shaky hand and caught Abernathy's shoulder; his fingers pinched to the bone.

"I was soun' asleep," Abernathy said. "De thundah done woke me. Leas' I t'ought he was de thundah an' I woke up an' I felt somep'n. I knowed den he ain't thundah. I knowed den he . . ."

"Cobb, what is it?" Sandy came running down the steps in his underwear, brandishing an umbrella like a cudgel.

"I hop up and run out in de rain and dere was a big flash er lightnin' an' I seen it. I seen dat black derrick and I slip an' fall in dat loblolly of it an' she got on mah han's and my clo'es and she spray on me and I'm soppin' wet wif it an' I stink wif it. Boy, she sho' do stink."

"Damn it, Sandy, we've got an oil well!" Cobb shouted. "You hear him. We've got a well."

Sandy blinked, and put down the umbrella.

"She blew in by herself," Cobb said. "She blew in in the nighttime. Sandy, get your clothes on."

"I come heah quick as I could," Abernathy said. "Cobb, she's a-runnin' down de road lak a ribber. You got to hurry."

Cobb raced up the stairs. He dropped the patchwork cover in the hall and saw Nora's startled face as he ducked

past her into his room. He grabbed a shirt, pulled on his pants, and thrust his feet without socks into shoes. He ran back into the hall, buttoning his shirt.

"Cobb!" Nora cried.

He threw his arms around her. "Nora, you're rich. You're rich, too."

"You struck oil?"

"It looks like we struck an ocean of it. Sandy, come on."

"Now, damn your eyes, wait for me," Nora said. "I'm coming, too."

Sandy came out of his room with his pants and shoes on, carrying a shirt. They ran downstairs and out to Cobb's car. Abernathy was waiting there and Cobb rubbed his hand along the old man's shirt, lifted his palm to his face.

"Sandy, just smell it. He ain't wet with water. He's wet with oil!"

"I'm wet with water," Sandy said. They were standing in the rain. "Let's go."

"We got to wait for Nora."

She came running from the house, wearing slippers on her feet, a skirt and a sweater pulled on over her nightgown. She had taken a hat of Cobb's from the hatrack and jammed it over her white hair.

"Cobb, you better let me drive," Sandy said.

"Hell, no."

Cobb backed into the street and turned toward town. The public square was empty on that early morning, and Cobb cut across it, skidded onto the road north. They picked up speed on the downgrade, crossed the old railroad tracks, and started up the opposite slope.

"Careful, Cobb," Sandy said. "For God's sake, be careful."

"Quit fussing," Nora said. "He's doing all right. Step on it, Cobb."

Cobb turned off on the graded road leading to the rig. There were deep ruts cut in it by the loaded trucks and he

could not keep the car in the ruts. It skidded from side to side, off the road on the turns. The rock fence came to view. Cobb made another turn and then they saw the well.

There was a plume of oil against the gray sky, fifty feet above the derrick, a hundred and thirty feet from the ground. It spread like a blacker rain cloud across the heavens, fanning out in a fine, flar-flung spray, and below it, through it, they saw the dark girts and sway braces of the derrick and in the derrick a thick black stream, rushing upward with a hollow roar.

The car skidded and went off the road altogether and Cobb pulled it back into control. Then he saw the road, black, shimmering, with colored stains moving down the hill. Streaks of purple, blue and red. Rainbows in the ruts of the road.

"Stop the car," Sandy yelled. "Don't go any closer. You want to set off that gas?"

Cobb could hardly hear the shout in the noise, the cavernous roar of a caged monster there on the side of the hill. He stepped on the brake and got out of the car, stumbled, and ran across the road. His shoes were stained with oil. He vaulted over the fence and lost one shoe. He did not stop to pick it up, but ran on toward the well. The grass was black with oil; the land looked as if it had been charred by a great fire.

Cobb reached the slush pit and stopped, staring at the black spout, the cloud of oilspray that blew to the other side, that settled on the trees three hundred yards away.

Under tremendous pressure from the beds where it had gathered for millions of years the oil rushed up through the hole that Cobb had drilled down into the earth. The discovery well. The Cobb Walters-Abernathy No. 1. Thousands of gallons of oil sprayed on the countryside, settling on John Goback's field of mature cotton down below and blackening the bolls. A thousand barrels a day, at least.

Maybe two thousand, perhaps three thousand. Three thousand barrels of oil.

Oil for fuel. Gasoline for automobiles, oil for the roads on which they rolled; gasoline for tractors to plow the land and oil for treatments to protect the crops; gasoline for tanks, airplanes; oil to drive steamships and submarines and to grease the ways at their launching. Grease for elevators to slide on, for axles to turn on, for trucks, railroads, transmissions. Oil for power plants, locomotives, ships and homes; oil for floors and sewing machines; oil for paints, varnishes, lacquers, for linoleum, candles, matches, insulation; for soaps, shaving soaps, disinfectants, preservatives. Oil for artist's crayons, for tarpaper, carbon, for waterproofing. Oil for paving, anti-freeze, for cold creams, shampoos, germicides. Oil for poison gas and high explosives, for incendiary bombs. Oil for medicinal products, for vaselines, nasal sprays, laxatives. Oil for the druggist's trade in refinements of the Seneca Oil that was sold in the drug stores of Pennsylvania seventy years ago, before the first oil well. . . . The hydrocarbons of oil, not all discovered, not all put to use, to be rearranged for a thousand uses, for a thousand products, and for thousands yet to come. Oil to build a civilization, and oil to destroy it.

Cobb stared at it. Three thousand barrels of oil a day. Three thousand barrels at over a dollar a barrel. More than three thousand dollars a day.

"Don't nobody strike a match," Sandy said. "Cobb, we got to get busy."

"You old raincrow," Cobb said. "Look at it. Smell it. Taste it. Sandy, is that oil, or ain't it?"

"It's oil, all right."

"It's three thousand dollars' worth of it. Three thousand dollars a day, Sandy."

"Not until you store it. Right now it's a lawsuit for old man Goback's cotton. Cobb, we got to get busy."

Cobb raised his eyes to the wind-blown plume of oil.

The smell of it was penetrating and mysterious. Nora pinched his arm and grinned at him. "Cobb, where's your other shoe?"

He looked at his bare foot, greasy now with crude oil. "It must have fell off. I didn't stop to tie 'em."

"That crude is pouring down the gully," Sandy said. "It's running off down the road. Now listen to me, Cobb, we got to throw up some reservoirs. We got to get some men and shovels and all the teams of horses we can lay hands on and gang plows for 'em to pull."

"Yes, sure," Cobb said.

"What do you say we throw us up some kind of dam in the gully and let her fill up."

"Sure. All right."

"And we got to get some men to stand guard. We got to keep the crowd away from here. Cobb, will you get it through your head that this thing is dangerous? Come on, let's go to town."

Cobb turned and limped back to the car, grinning and silent. Sandy found his shoe in the grass and Cobb put it on. He climbed over the fence in a dream.

"Now I *am* going to drive," Sandy said.

They got in the car, with Sandy at the wheel.

"Sandy, wasn't it easy?" Cobb said. "Wasn't it *easy*?"

Sandy turned the car and headed back toward Lebanon.

"I can't get over it," Cobb said. "It was so easy."

"We got to get some men and throw up reservoirs," Sandy said. "We'll go to the Chamber of Commerce and put Ralph Paige to work. We'll get every man and every shovel we can get. We'll throw up some reservoirs and then we'll see if we can shut down that well."

"Sandy," Cobb said. "Do you know the tools are still down in that hole?"

"That's so. They are."

Cobb whistled. "Man, I got an oil well there. Would you say she was about three thousand barrels?"

"It's a good well, all right, but we got to get her capped. See here, Cobb, you get on the long distance phone and have a control head sent up right away."

"You do it," Cobb said.

"Look here, son, you got to get some sense into your head. We got work to do."

"There's no sense in my head," Cobb said. "That's a fact."

Sandy turned into the square. The stores were opening their doors for the day and men were sweeping the sidewalks. After the rain the air was clean. Sandy turned to the curb in front of the offices of the Chamber of Commerce. He got out and said, "Do you suppose we could get the loan of some of them bulldozers off the highway department?"

"Ask Ralph Paige," Cobb said, and slid behind the wheel.

"Say, where are you going?"

"I'll be back. Sandy, you talk to Ralph and get a gang of men. I'll see you out at the well."

Sandy frowned and swore and turned away, and Ned Barstow, on his way to work at the Collins drug store, stared at him and called out, "Hey, man, what's that on your clothes?"

"It's oil," Sandy said, and walked on.

Ned saw Cobb. "Did he say oil?" He ran forward.

Cobb thumbed his nose and grinned and backed out into the square. Nora looked at him. His hair was rumpled and his chin was rough with beard. His eyes had a wild, strained look, as if he had not slept for days.

"Cobb, you're a sight. Where are you headed now?"

Cobb laughed. "Nora, ain't it the damndest thing that ever happened?"

He turned out of the square, turned east along beside the tracks of the Lebanon & County Railroad.

"Where are you bound, Cobb? Aren't you going to

pitch in and do something about that stuff pouring all over creation?"

"Let it pour," Cobb said, and laughed.

They passed the Devant way station and came to where the road dipped down to the fording of Fossil Creek. Cobb crossed the creek and turned left, passed over a cattle guard, and climbed the hill to the Devant house.

"What do you want out here, Cobb?"

"I tell you, Nora. Jan Devant is one of my big investors. I want to tell her she'll get her money back."

"Look here, boy, I can't go up there. I've got on an old sweater and bedroom slippers and I'm wearing your hat. Look at me."

"You look grand," Cobb said.

He turned in under the trees, in front of the Devant house. It was a one-storey white building that spread out haphazardly under the pecan trees, with a screened porch on three sides. Cobb ran up to the front door and Jan opened it before he could knock. She stared at his strange smile, his stained clothing and uncombed hair. "Cobb, what is it?"

"Just what you think, honey. It's oil! Look at me. I'm spattered with it. Jan, she's flowing three thousand barrels with the tools in the hole."

He saw her face. There was not the same wild light in her brown eyes; her smile was more restrained than his. But there was an expression of satisfaction, of complete inner happiness that seemed to include Cobb. Suddenly he stepped forward and kissed her. Her lips were cool and unyielding, her laugh surprised and warm. She stepped back. "Why, Cobb!"

"I just had to do it," he said. "I had to thank you, Jan. Say, I'm sorry."

"Who's that in your car, Cobb?"

"Oh, that's Nora Joplin."

"Jan, what's this?" Ardmore Devant appeared behind her

in the hallway. He came out into the morning light, looking coldly at Cobb.

"Cobb struck oil, Father," Jan said.

The words were flat and inadequate. Ardmore wet his lips.

"It looks like about three thousand barrels," Cobb said. "She blew in during the night. Look, I'm covered with it."

"Cobb, I want to see it," Jan cried.

"So you really struck oil," Ardmore said. "Well, I never believed, I never expected . . . Well!"

"Father, let's go see it," Jan said.

Ardmore looked at his watch. "I'll have to stop by the bank first." He grunted. "So you struck oil, Cobb. Well, I was the first to believe it was possible. I helped assemble that block of leases." He turned back into the house and called, "Pruitt!"

"Hurry, Father," Jan said. "I want to see that well."

"You better go with Cobb then. I'll be busy for a while."

Jan looked at Ardmore with her lips parted, her head on one side. As they went toward the car she said to Cobb, "It's hard to figure Father some times."

"Because he told you to drive off with me?" Cobb grinned. "That's easy. He ain't going to the bank. Him and Pruitt are on their way right now to grab off a lease on every acre of land that's anywhere near the well."

She nodded. "That's probably it."

"And I ought to do the same thing," Cobb said. "Jan, we got to protect our investment. I'm going to buy back those leases Halliday sold off, if I can find out who holds 'em."

Jan's laughter was vibrant. "I just thought, I'll be rich too."

"You bet you will. Let's get going."

They were all three in the front seat, and Nora smiled and blushed and explained that she had been so excited that she had just thrown something on over her nightie and run

out to the car. Cobb took the back pasture road to the lease, and when they were yet a long way off they saw the plume of oil against the southwest sky. A strong breeze was blowing and the plume was spread thin and far off from the well in a diluted spray. It was blowing toward them and Cobb stopped the car. They left it beside the road and walked the rest of the way in a wide semicircle to reach the rig on the windward side. They passed Abernathy's shack and the corrugated tin was stained with oil. The grass in which they walked had turned black, and they had to hurdle a small ravine in which there was a stream of crude.

When they came out of the blackjack trees north of the rig they saw the crowd. Off to the right a crew of men already was at work, with six teams of horses, and Cobb saw another team approaching on the road from Lebanon. There were men with spades and shovels, and a long way off Cobb saw Sandy on the bank of the gully, where they were making a dam of earth to catch the oil.

They entered the crowd and Ed Drum ran up and caught Cobb's arm, shook his hand. He was pushed aside by others, but Cobb heard him say, "I sent the story to the city papers, Cobb." Ralph Paige was there, and Nancy Jo. She rushed forward and threw her arms around Cobb's neck and kissed him. "It's wonderful, Cobb. We'll all be millionaires."

Cobb grinned.

"Boy, this town owes you a vote of thanks," Ralph said. "We'll never forget what we owe you, Cobb. Look at it blow!—Nancy Jo, ain't that a sight?"

Anson North was next, saying, "Cobb, I'm in the business and I happen to know you can get a dollar seven a barrel for that oil."

"You charged me two bucks," Cobb said.

There was Rob Witter, grinning at him. There were people Cobb did not even know who crowded around him, listened to whatever he said, and repeated it. "Three thou-

sand barrels. He says it's three thousand barrels a day." And someone said, "I got a stock. Bought it just the other day. Just under the line." And another, "My forty acres is only two miles off."

"Cobb, I had a feeling you'd do it," Nancy Jo said. "I knew there wasn't any obstacle too big for you."

"It was Jan here done it, Nancy Jo."

"Jan?"

"She came to my rescue," Cobb said. "Jan, I'll never forget that."

Nancy Jo looked at Jan with narrowed eyes, then said to Cobb, "Did Ed invest in your company?"

"No, he didn't. Sweetie was against it."

Ralph Paige said, "Well, I've got five shares and I wish it was more. Cobb, this is something. Look at that oil spout. Look at that crowd coming. The public square is deserted this morning, for sure."

"You girls are ruining your clothes," Cobb said. "Them stains won't come out. Jan, you'll have to throw those white shoes away."

"No, indeed." She looked at him, her eyes shining. "I'll never part with these shoes, Cobb."

He found her hand and squeezed it, and they stood looking at the flow of oil. A long time later, when Sandy found him in the crowd and told him angrily that they had to get to work, they had to cap the well, Cobb moved off in a daze. But as they walked over to the gully he put his hand on Sandy's shoulder and said, "I sure appreciate the way you're taking over. I know I'm not much good today. And look here, you got an interest in this oil. I put your name down for five shares of stock a long time ago."

"Well, say, Cobb. Thanks."

"Remember, I told you you was too pension-minded," Cobb said.

First they dammed the gully an eighth of a mile below the well, and gang plows and bulldozers threw up earthen

dikes to catch the flow of oil. They worked all day, and six men were posted as guards to keep the crowd back from the well and to prevent smoking and the striking of a match. Even the spark of a passing car might ignite the gas.

Men stood staring at the spout of oil, as men had stared in Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, as each new field was discovered in the Mid-Continent area. For thirty years now they had been prospecting, drilling, producing, in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, in Arkansas and northern Louisiana. They had found the big pools: Burkburnett, Ranger and the Panhandle of Texas; Burbank, Cushing and Seminole. And now another discovery well. The Cobb Walters No. 1 Abernathy. It was the Lebanon pool and when another well was drilled it would be an oil field. The Lebanon field.

Ed Drum had sent the story to the city papers and Lebanon made headlines on the oil pages, where there was discussion also of another discovery well that had been drilled in the drab piney woods of East Texas, by a veteran wildcatter whom they called Dad Joiner. On October 5, 1930, it was completed for 255 barrels a day at 3,592 feet in the Woodbine sand of the Upper Cretaceous System. The East Texas discovery was not highly regarded in the oil business.

15

COBB drove through Aldo Junction soon after the evening train from the west had passed, and there were automobiles on the road ahead of them, standard model cars on which *taxi* had been daubed in white paint. There were five of them in service now and the fare to Lebanon had been raised from seventy-five cents to five dollars per person, twenty-five dollars for the car. They met all trains, and there was rarely room in the regular bus, now that oil had been struck in Lebanon.

The traffic ahead lifted a low bank of dust and Cobb drove slowly. His eyes were strained from the long drive to Wichita Falls and back and the dry ache of them had increased his irritation. He was angry, and he cursed the dust and cursed the crowds that were coming every day to Lebanon.

The road followed the abandoned railroad embankment, and passed to the east of the Abernathy well. The well had been capped at last, after three days when the pressure had lessened, and there was no light on the hillside where the black rig towered above Abernathy's shack of tin and planks.

Cobb reached the last stretch of white road into Lebanon and the dust rose thickly in the night. Off to the right, under the trees, was the Lord's Adopted tabernacle, and there were cots under the sexagonal roof, there were blankets spread on the benches. Twice a year the members of the Lord's Adopted sect convened in Lebanon, spread their tents under the trees to sleep through the daytime,

and conducted their services under the decrepit roof of the tabernacle all night long, shouting, "Holy, holy, holy. Praise the Lord. Hallelujah!" All night long.

But now it was changed. There were no patchwork quilts and household goods on the grass. Among the cots crowded in the tabernacle there were only men, no women. Cobb had only a glimpse of it as he drove on through the white dust.

Soon the street mercifully was paved and the dust settled. He saw crowds on the street, crowds on the courthouse lawn. He passed the Lebanon House and the gallery was jammed under the high portico. Cobb hardly glanced around him as he drove on to Persimmon Street. He turned the car into the driveway and stopped, and the headlamps picked up two figures by the garage. He saw blonde hair bright in the panel of light, and shut off the engine.

He got out of the car, and not for a moment did he recognize Clara, not until he heard her voice, calling his name. She ran toward him, ran into his arms. He patted her shoulder and smiled at the excitement in her voice. "Cobb, I'm so happy about it. I just had to come home, as soon as I could after I got your telegram."

"When did you get here?"

"Just a half hour ago."

"I thought you were signed up for a long time."

"I was, but when your telegram came . . . And what a telegram. Struck oil! Couldn't you have said a little more? Cobb, you get ten words, you know." She looked up at his face and the smile faded on her lips. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Sure I am."

"You haven't said so."

"I'm glad to see you," Cobb said. But he was looking over her shoulder at the tall man who stood by the door of the garage. He recognized the heavy shoulders, the long face, rounded at the jaw, and the thick black eyebrows.

"Oh," Clara said. "This is Will Andrews—Cobb Walters."

"I believe I know Mr. Andrews."

"Do you? He's boarding—in the garage." Clara laughed. "We just finished putting a cot and a bureau out there for him. Isn't it crazy? But there wasn't any room in the house and Nora said she certainly wouldn't let him sleep on the courthouse lawn, like some men are, or on a pool table. Cobb, isn't this town mad? People sleeping in garages, people sleeping in tents, on the grass, on pool tables. Did you ever see anything like it?"

"Come inside a minute," Cobb said. "I want to talk to you."

"All right. Excuse us, Mr. Andrews."

Cobb led the way into the house, and they went into the parlor, a room of diligent cleanliness which was rarely used, which was kept closed and shaded to protect the rugs and furniture from the Texas sun.

"Cobb, I want to see that well," Clara said. "I want to see it right away. Darling, isn't it wonderful? You did it."

He looked down at her, unsmiling. "What is that fellow doing here?"

"Mr. Andrews?"

"Naturally."

"Why, he came over from Aldo Junction in the rent car I was in. There wasn't any room in the Lebanon House, and I couldn't let him sleep on a pool table, so I brought him here."

"Suppose you tell him to clear out in the morning."

"Cobb, what's the matter?—Why, I hardly know him."

He looked down at her with a set, angry expression that plainly was not jealousy. "I know him," he said. "He was out at the well when Jesse Halliday was drilling. He's a scout for the Trading Post Oil Company."

"No. Cobb, from what he said I think he's left the company. He . . ."

"You see he's gone in the morning," Cobb broke in.

"Now, Cobb, really! This is Nora's house. Don't be so dictatorial. What is the matter with you?"

"Plenty." Cobb glanced around him at the drawn shades, the closed door. "Come on, we'll go somewhere in my car."

"Let's go see the well."

"To hell with the well."

"But I haven't even seen it, Cobb."

"All right. I don't care where we go. Come on."

As he opened the door they saw Nora standing in the hall with Will Andrews.

"Cobb, what do you think of that girl?" Nora asked. "She didn't even let us know she was coming. Why, the way things are I don't know where I'll find her a place to sleep. Here I am full up, from cellar to roof, and I just can't get any help. I can't get a girl anywhere. I sure do need you here, Clara."

"That's a fine thing." Clara spread her hands. "We strike oil, and I come home to help spend lots of money, and what happens? I'm expected to wash dishes and make beds. Nora, why in heaven's name do you go on boarding people? You can give them beds, but do you have to feed them?"

Nora shook her head. "You just try to get a meal in a restaurant. Just you go down to the Alamo Café and look at it. Why, there're sitting on the stools and there's a line of men behind them and there's a line of men behind that line and as soon as a stool is empty there's somebody there to pop down on it."

"Golly," Clara said. "This is something." She smiled teasingly at Cobb. "How has our hero been handling himself?"

"All right," Cobb said shortly. "Why shouldn't I?"

"He's back to normal," Nora said. "But that first day!" She lifted her hands, palms outward. "He was a wild man."

He made me sit down and drink a half bottle of whisky, didn't you, Cobb?"

"Nora, he *made* you, did you say?"

"It's a fact. Didn't you, Cobb? He opened a bottle and we sat down and drank it all up."

"So you drank a half bottle," Clara said. "Fifty-fifty, like the Mexican who made hot tamales, fifty-fifty. Fifty horse and fifty rabbit. He killed a horse and he killed a rabbit. Nora, I believe you had the rabbit's share of that bottle."

"Anyhow, I had enough. And I had to put Cobb to bed."

Cobb grinned sourly. "Come on, Clara, let's go."

"We're off to see the well, Nora," Clara said.

Will Andrews stepped forward. His eyes were bright and very blue. "You remember I scouted that well for the Trading Post Oil Company, Walters," he said.

"Yes."

"Well, I reported it abandoned. You had moved off the tools and the rig was abandoned. I never knew another test had been started." He smiled. "The Trading Post had a chance at that spread in the first place, but they turned it down. That's the way it goes in this crazy oil game."

"That's the way it goes," Cobb said.

"Mr. Andrews, do you still represent the Trading Post?" Clara asked.

"No, I'm on my own now." His slow drawl timed his words, and his manner toward Clara had the pleasant deference of a favorite uncle. "When I heard Walters had made an oiler I got here as fast as I could. My car was in the shop, so I put a toothbrush in my pocket and hopped the train. I was surely in luck when I met you, Miss Joplin, or I wouldn't have a place to sleep."

"Come on, Clara," Cobb said, and strode ahead of her to the door.

When she got in the car beside him she said softly, "You see?"

"Yes. All right."

He backed out into Persimmon Street, and he was aware that Clara was watching his face. "Listen, it's got to be a good reason," she said quietly. "It's got to be a good reason for you to act so damned boorish, Cobb."

"Boorish?" He was surprised. "Say, I'm sorry. I got a lot on my mind. This has been a bad day."

She moved nearer him. "Tell me about it."

"Well, I went to Wichita Falls to see the Tropok Pipeline Company. It's a subsidiary of the Trading Post and their main trunk line runs twenty miles from here, over by Aldo Junction."

"Yes?"

"I've got a lot of oil. I've got eight or nine thousand barrels of oil out there in earth storage. I've got a three-thousand-barrel well shut down. I got to start drilling offsets and producing lots of oil and of course I've got to have a market for it. I got to sell it."

"Of course."

"Don't just say of course," Cobb parroted her. "Of course."

"You *are* bad-tempered. I didn't mean to irritate you."

"Well, this is the situation. Naturally I went to the Tropok and asked them to run a gathering line over for an outlet for my oil. I got to sell some of that oil right away because I need the money. I got to have money before I go to drilling offsets."

He paused, but Clara did not say "of course" this time. She said nothing.

"So I went to Wichita Falls and saw one of the big shots," Cobb said bitterly. "Mr. Big Shot Jones, executive vice-president, and I spoke to him about a pipeline and he said, sure, if I wanted to build it myself, sure they'd buy my oil. He said there was plenty of oil already and he re-

mind me that out at Yates and down at Darst Creek they had so damned much oil the pipelines couldn't carry it all and they had to prorate those fields to reduce the output. And he said as far as he could tell the Walters-Abernathy No. 1 was just a freak well. It was just a sand lens and would play out in a hurry. He said his company wasn't interested in investing a big sum of money in building a gathering system over here."

Clara still was silent and he glared at her. She said softly, "Yes, Cobb?"

"He never said it outright," Cobb went on. "He never put it in so many words, but he asked what my holdings were, and if I'd had a contour map made of the structure, and he kind of hinted that the Trading Post would take some of those leases off my hands, if the price was right and if I had a mind to sell. He hinted that if the company had an incentive, maybe it would build a gathering line, but he couldn't be sure. So if I sell some leases, maybe they'll build a pipeline, and I'll be damned if I'll sell a solitary acre."

"You bet you won't," Clara said warmly.

"So I'll just have to whistle for a pipeline, and I can't get my oil to market." He looked at her. "So that's why I was sore and wanted you to tell this Mr. Andrews to go about his business."

Clara lit two cigarettes and passed one to him. He drove across the rusty railroad tracks and out of town. They passed the Lord's Adopted tabernacle, where the tents were pitched under the trees, and drove on into darkness.

Cobb sighed. "Well, how was New Mexico?"

"Not so good. I was glad to get away. When I got your telegram I gave them two days' notice and cleared out."

"What was the matter with it?"

"I don't know. It was just unreal. Pueblo Indians in turquoise blue hawking turquoise jewelry on the streets. At-

mosphere, ozone, all that. And the room I lived in was just big enough to accommodate a bed, a bureau, a chair, and my two feet, slightly swollen.—Oh, hell, Cobb, I missed you, that's all."

"There's the rig," Cobb said.

There was a watchman at the well, and Cobb stopped the car by the rock fence. "Follow me and walk carefully," he said. "This ground is still slippery."

He had a flashlight and he took her to the rig, showed her how it was black and slimy with crude oil, showed her the bulge of the control head which capped the well and withstood the tremendous pressure from below. His flashlight shone on the lakes of oil in the gully, in the earthen reservoir.

"It might as well be water," he told her. "I can't sell it. I can't do anything with it."

They returned to the car, and after long consideration Clara said, "Cobb, do you suppose you'd better sell?"

"No, sir. This is mine and nobody is going to take it away from me."

"I suppose you couldn't build the line yourself?"

He snorted. "Where would I get the money? Right of way, survey, pipe, labor—it costs heavy."

He drove down the hill and the car bumped over the rusty tracks. They were halfway to the public square when Clara asked, "How about the railroad?"

"That's as far away as the pipeline."

"But they transport oil by rail, too?"

"Of course they do." Cobb squeezed his hands impatiently on the steering wheel.

"Do I annoy you very much?" Clara sat upright, and her cheeks were flushed.

"Annoy me? Now, Clara, you can see I'm in a bad mood. Let's talk about something else."

"All right." She glanced at him out of the corners of

her eyes and said stiffly, "I was only going to say, how about the Nancy Hanks?"

Cobb suddenly put on the brakes and stopped the car in the middle of the street.

"Why not?" Clara asked. "The tracks are still there. The . . ."

"Why not?" Cobb almost shouted. "You're damned right. Why not? That roadbed is okay. It's entirely okay. We can run tank cars right down to the station and we can pipe the oil down the hill to them. Gravity flow. It's just as simple as that! Clara, that's it. What would I ever do without you?"

He pulled her toward him and kissed her, and he saw tears in her eyes. "Honey, you're swell," he said. "But I don't know what's the matter with me. I don't know why I didn't think of that. I tell you what we'll do. We'll build a loading rack at Devant, at the old feedhouse there. It's nearer than Lebanon, only about two miles from the well and all downgrade. And I won't have to worry about the right of way because I have that land under lease." He pinched her arm. "Clara, you've certainly been a help. You persuaded me to drill that well in the first place and you persuaded me to form a company to do it."

"I thought you'd forgotten that," she said softly.

"Forgotten it? You bet I haven't. And I'll tell you something else. I'll tell you a secret. It was because of you that I studied up on geology and learned enough to know what that outcrop over on Fossil Creek meant."

"Really?" Her tone was vibrant.

"Listen, how about the Nancy Hanks? Who owns it now? Who's got the stock?"

"I believe it's in receivership."

"Yes, I think it is something like that. I wonder who the receiver is."

"Oliver Wade, I think."

"Sure, it would be Oliver.—Clara, I'll go see him in the morning. We'll get that track in order. We'll get a pipe laid. The old Lebanon and County Railroad is going to roll again." He reached for her hand. "I can't thank you enough."

16

SAM DRUM had moved to Lebanon in 1880 and established the first newspaper in Lebanon County. He had brought his printing press in a wagon and set up his first office in a tent while he talked himself into credit and advertising for the new paper, the *Lebanon News*. He had been an itinerant printer all his life, and so for three years he had not moved his newspaper into permanent quarters. But in 1883 he had married Amelia Aldo, a daughter of the first settler in Lebanon County, and rented an office on the square. Ten years later, when the Lebanon State Bank failed in the panic of 1893, he had acquired the limestone building in which the newspaper still was operated.

Sam Drum remained a legend in Lebanon. His black mustaches had been the longest in town, and his shaving mug still stood on the shelf in the Peters barber shop. His use of language, although it was not evidenced in the files of the *Lebanon News*, had been imitated and passed on to every mule in the county. He had been a big man, with the physical equipment to make secure the freedom of the press. In those days the *Lebanon News* had said what Sam Drum thought, and there had been occasions when the editor carried a gun and kept the shades drawn in the office.

When Sam Drum died his wife became the editor, and the *Lebanon News* thereafter paid less attention to stolen horses and politics, and more to wedding gowns and church meetings and flower gardens. Its columns leaned weakly for support upon solid blocks of syndicated material: fashions, poetry and a New York columnist with a

country boy's viewpoint. In fifteen years no advertiser had been affronted.

Amelia Drum kept rigid office hours. Her son drove her to the newspaper at eight o'clock each morning and she remained until six in the evening. All day long she hardly stirred from her stool; the news came to her. She weighed nearly two hundred pounds and she sat upon her stool like a monument to the press, which had treated her well. But her eyes were active. Quick and curious, long-lashed, she used them still with the awareness of a beauty. Beside her as she worked she kept a bottle of beef and iron tonic, which she sipped on the hour. She was never very well, she said, but she had not missed a day at the office since her son was born.

Cobb went to the office of the *Lebanon News* that next morning immediately after breakfast, but Amelia Drum was there before him, and Ed was at his desk in a corner, tapping on an old typewriter that was the first acquired by the newspaper. Mrs. Drum's bright glance met Cobb as he entered.

"Cobb Walters! I was just asking Ed why you hadn't been in to see me. Boy, didn't I give you your first job?"

"You sure did."

"Now sit down. I want you to tell me all about it. You know, our circulation has increased by six hundred. What do you think of that?"

"In that case I'm glad I ain't still delivering papers," Cobb said.

"Sit down here, Cobb. I want to hear all about that oil well of yours."

Cobb glanced at Ed. "Mrs. Drum, I'm pretty busy today. I stopped in to ask you a favor."

"All right, Cobb."

"I want to see the back files of the *Lebanon News*."

"Sure.—Ed, Cobb wants to see the files. I don't know why. He didn't say why."

Ed came forward. "What period, Cobb?"

"Back in the nineties. Say eighteen ninety-seven."

Mrs. Drum gave the impression of turning on her stool; actually only her head turned. "What in the world do you want to find in eighteen ninety-seven, Cobb? I can tell you all about it. Let's see. In ninety-seven they built the new courthouse. In ninety-seven old Bowman Devant shot a man. That was a big year. They built the railroad, too, in ninety-seven."

"That's right," Cobb said.

"Boy, you don't remember. You weren't even born."

Ed frowned slightly. "I guess Cobb's reason is private, Sweetie."

"Why, Ed! Cobb never had any secrets from us. Did you, Cobb?"

"I guess not," Cobb said.

"Come on, Cobb," Ed said. "The files are back here."

He led Cobb to the rear of the office, and took down bound volumes from a shelf. "Here's January to June, eighteen ninety-seven, and here's June to December. Help yourself."

Cobb opened the first volume. The pages were yellow and thin and he turned them with care. He came to the fifteenth of February and there was a front page story: *Railroad Planned for Lebanon*. This was in the days of Sam Drum.

This town will not rest easy until it has a rail connection, and since the main line has passed us by steps have been taken by civic-minded citizens to build a spur to Aldo Township, so this newspaper has not been wasting its breath after all. It looks like there will finally be some action, and Bowman Devant has formed a citizen's committee to expedite plans.

Cobb skimmed through the rest of the story, turned another page. *Shooting in the Square*. It was the story of how Bowman Devant had settled a lawsuit out of court on

the square. Cobb did not read it. Two days later the newspaper announced: *Ardmore Devant has been chosen as chairman of the citizen's committee which . . .* Cobb turned another page.

"I won't bother you any more," Ed said, still peering over Cobb's shoulder. "I've got work to do."

"Wait a minute, Ed." Cobb put his finger on a column of type. "See this?"

Ed blinked at the headline: *Subscribers to Railroad Fund Announced.*

"What about it?"

"I guess pretty near everybody in town subscribed to that fund and got stock in the old Nancy Hanks."

"I guess so. My father bought some for the paper. Had to. We still got it."

Cobb hesitated an instant. "Ed, you want to go in with me on a deal?"

"What deal?"

"Something pretty big. I got to have some help and you can do it. You're the newspaper editor. Everybody knows you."

"Just the assistant editor, Cobb."

"People know you. That's all that counts."

"Cobb, what is all this?"

"I want to buy up all the stock I can in the old Nancy Hanks, as cheap as I can."

"Buy it, Cobb? Say, I expect people would give it to you. What do you want with it?"

"I want to run a railroad."

Ed perched on the windowsill. "If I didn't know you, Cobb, I'd say that oil well had gone to your head. If you want to play railroad man, why don't you . . ."

"I ain't playing," Cobb broke in. "Listen, Ed, I'm going to recondition that railroad and ship my oil on it."

"Oh."

"We get that stock and start the tank cars rolling and

we'll make a mint of money. We'll ship all the oil out of this field, Ed."

"Oh, I see."

"What are you two whispering about back there?" Mrs. Drum called out.

Cobb shook his head and Ed said, "Nothing, Sweetie. Just talking."

"Just telling naughty jokes, I expect."

"Want to hear one?" Cobb asked.

"Certainly I do not. Ed, you get back to your work."

"Right away, Sweetie."

"Well, how about it, Ed?" Cobb asked. "Are you in?"

"You bet I am."

"How much dough can you lay your hands on?"

"Several hundred, Cobb. Maybe a thousand. If my mother doesn't find out."

"Don't you let her. You keep your mouth buttoned, Ed. Now look here, this is what I want you to do. I want you to go through this paper and get the names of all who subscribed to the railroad fund. Somewhere in the attic, in a trunk some place, there'll be blocks of stock. I want you to go out and buy it, Ed."

"You bet. I'll start out first thing in the morning."

"You'll start in today. Look here, I've got an ocean of oil waiting to be shipped. We got to get busy."

"Okay. Today then."

"We'll make up a list and I'll take some of them, those I know, and you take the rest."

Ed nodded, and scratched his chin. "Cobb, you're not so dumb. You think of everything."

"I got to. I got to get that oil moving. Get me a pencil and some paper."

Cobb drew up a stool and went to work, turning the yellow pages, copying the names of all who had subscribed. There was a list of over two hundred when he had finished,

and he checked off the names of those he knew. He called Ed over.

"First thing we got to find just what the state of that company is. I'm going over to see Oliver Wade. And, Ed, you get busy."

"I got to think up an excuse for Sweetie."

"Tell her you're going out to get drunk."

Ed laughed. His eyes were shining.

"That's what you ought to do," Cobb said, and walked out of the office.

Cobb stopped on the corner and looked around the square. Lebanon was booming. Cars gray with dust were wheeling slowly around the square in search of a place to park. There was a noise of engines such as he had never heard before in Lebanon, a squeaking of brakes and a screeching of horns. Men stood on the corners, under the elm trees in the courthouse park. The gallery of the Lebanon House was crowded, and there was a man who walked about with a sign, *notary public*, pinned to his lapel. And in the hotel, in the drug stores, in the cafés, there were oil maps for sale. Parked on the square was a fruit vender's truck, and above the crates of peaches and oranges was a sign *Maps of this area for sale*.

One automobile drove slowly around the square, again and again, and propped on the front bumper was a sign inked on cardboard that said: *Wanted: Room and Board*. On the eastern side of the square, where there were two vacant lots, a truck was unloading lumber and carpenters already were at work erecting the framework of a building which would house, according to a sign, the Hollywood Café.

Cobb walked on. The sidewalk was crowded. In front of the Peters barber shop there was a close group of men; inside a dozen waited for the barber chair. A low voice said, "Say, you don't look much like a man who just brought in a new field."

Cobb turned and saw Will Andrews smiling at him. They shook hands. "I'm fixing to drill a well north of your discovery well, Walters," Will Andrews said. "About a half mile north."

He drew Cobb aside, near the glass front of the barber shop. "I've been wanting to talk to you. I have a proposition to make. There's no hurry about it, but I want to talk it over with you some time. I think we can work together."

Cobb studied the man's face. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean let's get together. I've got some leases contiguous on yours and I thought you and me might form a committee and try to work out a unitization plan for the field, and at any rate for you and me."

Cobb shook his head and smiled. "Not until your leases are proved up, Andrews."

Will Andrews nodded. "All right, but I wish you'd think it over. The big companies have laid off Lebanon. They condemned this area a long time back because they said the sand in the Ordovician System was just too thin for a good accumulation. They're still laying off, and that gives us independents a chance. But it's going to be a hog wallow, Walters. There'll be hundreds of small operators drilling on tracts no bigger than a postage stamp. That's why you and me, with the holdings we've got, ought to take the initiative and try to work out a unitization plan."

"Just what holdings have you got?" Cobb asked.

"About eight hundred acres, due north of you."

"Eight hundred acres!" Cobb whistled.

The big man smiled. "You see, I scouted this area for the Trading Post, and I knew that Jesse Halliday disposed of some of his leases and I knew where he sold them. When I got the news you had brought in an oiler I was able to get around in time and buy up those leases and I managed to cover about eight hundred acres. It's practically a solid block and most of it joins on your leases."

"Well, I'll be damned," Cobb said.

"If you and I unitize we won't be fighting each other and we can space our wells properly and get the maximum recovery of that oil."

"After you drill a well, we'll talk," Cobb said.

He nodded and walked on to the Lebanon National Bank. Oliver Wade had his offices in the bank building, the floor above the bank. The entrance was by a flight of steps that opened off the side street, exterior steps that led up to Oliver's shingle.

Cobb walked into the office, where Oliver was dictating to his stenographer. Cobb waited until he had finished, listening to the lawyer's dry voice. Oliver Wade was thin and sallow. His brown eyes were abnormally large and had a bilious look. His lips were pinched as tight as his pocket-book.

"What brings you here, Cobb?" Oliver asked after he had dismissed his stenographer.

"Well, I need a lawyer," Cobb said.

Oliver smiled and cleared a space on the desk in front of him. Cobb glanced out the window. "I see the old Lebanon and County station down the hill. What are you going to do with that property?"

"Maybe we'll sell it one of these days. That's what I'm trying to do. You know, Cobb, I heard this morning that some fellas busted in and been sleeping there. And you know, the old passenger cars on that siding are a regular hotel. There was thirty men sleeping in each of 'em last night."

"What did you run 'em out for?"

"I didn't. No, sir. I charged 'em two bucks apiece."

"That's more money than the Lebanon and County has made in a long time."

"It is. Yes, it is. But every little bit helps. I'm engaged in liquidating that property and every bit helps. Cobb, what is it you wanted to see me about?"

"I want to incorporate, Oliver. I want to form an oil company."

"Oh, yes. The Lebanon Oil Company." Oliver frowned. "Sorry I didn't have the opportunity to take up some of that stock."

"I wonder would you have bought any, Oliver?"

"Why, certainly. A local enterprise? I believe in supporting local enterprise, Cobb."

"Then I'm sorry I didn't come around," Cobb said. "Now about this company, Oliver. You attend to all the rigamarole. It's to issue five hundred shares at one hundred dollars par value."

Oliver made notes on a pad of yellow paper. "All right, Cobb, I'll draw up the papers. Let's see, is it the Lebanon Oil Company or the Lebanon Gas and Oil Company?"

"Neither," Cobb said.

"No? I heard . . ."

"It's the Cobb Walters Oil Company," Cobb said. "That will be the name of it, Oliver."

I7

THERE was a vacant office above the Collins drug store, and Cobb rented it. A partition was installed for his private office, and one afternoon heavy mahogany furniture was moved in; a roll-top desk for Cobb, several chairs and a long table, a typewriter desk and typewriter. And on the glass-paneled door at the entrance the name of the company had been lettered in gold: *Cobb Walters Oil Company*.

These were exciting days. Big trucks rolled through the square, hauling huge machine parts, hauling structural steel for derricks, great joints of casing, mud pumps, engines, tremendous spindles of drill line. The major companies had bought in, and the Trading Post Oil Company had spudded in two wells, south and west of Cobb's spread. And there were many small operators and small leases and outpost wells had been staked far from the Abernathy well. Now, three weeks after the discovery of oil at Lebanon, the *Lebanon News* reported that eight field operations were in progress, and Cobb sold fuel to all the rigs at \$1.20 a barrel.

In the town the Hollywood Café opened for business and the waitresses were pretty girls who mysteriously appeared in Lebanon. Prices were doubled. A T-bone steak was a dollar now, and had been forty cents. A cup of coffee was a dime and a ham sandwich twenty-five cents. Food could be bought in Lebanon, but there were not roofs enough; there were not tents enough. Will Andrews moved next door to the Peters house, where he rented the dining

room for twenty dollars a week, but he still took his meals at the Joplin table. And the Joplin garage had another tenant.

Cobb had seen little of Clara since her return from New Mexico. He was up early and remained in the oil field most of the day, and with so many men in the house they did not have the same freedom. He did not tap on the door of her room; she did not come to his. But he thought of her that day as he inspected the gold letters on the door of his office. He telephoned the house on Persimmon Street, and Nora answered the call.

"Nora, is Clara there? I've got something to show her."

"She went out with that Mr. Andrews, Cobb. He's spudding in a well today."

"Oh, yes," Cobb said. "I believe I know the lease. Thanks, Nora."

He drove to the oil field. The road was choked with mule teams and he heard the sound of hammering, the shouts of men. Cobb smiled. This was the beginning of it, the first exciting stir, and even on the country roads he could see the boom that was coming. The roads were deeply scarred, with sand sifted in the ruts, and the fall winds blew sand in a desolate sweep along the ridges. In a pasture a teaming camp had been established and mules drooped their ears in a large corral, mules that had brought high prices in Lebanon County.

The bleak farmhouses along the road showed the change. Here there would be a new windowframe, a new screen door. Little things that had needed doing for so long had now been done. New axheads gleamed in the woodyards, new churn handles swung up and down; occasionally chintz curtains appeared and the farm girls walked with a lilting step and not for long would their feet be bare, nor for long would they go muleback to fetch a sack of flour.

The Andrews rig stood in the cowlot, on nearly level ground where the grass had been nibbled short, and the

derrick of structural steel was twice as tall as the courthouse tower. It was a rotary rig, a monstrous thing of steam and noise. Three huge boilers stood together and black smoke rose from their stacks. Steam hissed from a pipe and vapor rose above the slush pond and sometimes obscured the derrick and the sun, which struck bright highlights on the steel. There was ponderous machinery, painted red, and racks of black pipe, and a confusion of tremendous wrenches and hooks and pulleys on the rig floor.

The rig dominated the small plot of land, and dwarfed the unpainted house where the tenant farmer, who would have no share in the oil, tried to sleep at night through the pulsing of the mud pumps and the roar of steam. To the south was the slope on which stood the blackened derrick of the discovery well, and the grass was stained from oil that had flowed down the slope. In the air, which was very warm for late October, there was the penetrant odor of the crude oil, and even in the cowlot Cobb could smell it.

Clara was sitting in Will Andrews' car, and the big man stood beside her, with one foot on the runningboard. They both waved to Cobb as he got out of his car and went toward them.

"Well, she's spudded in," Will Andrews said.

Cobb nodded. There was a line of mesquite trees to the west, and beyond it the frame of a derrick was rising. He could see the blunt noses of five completed rigs spaced along the shelf of the western ridge. The activity of it all, the sense of haste and purpose, made him draw his breath deeply, and he grinned at a lone heifer which stood in a corner of the cowlot with head held high and pink-rimmed eyes staring at the flaming boilers.

"If I make a well I have eight hundred acres to develop," Will Andrews was saying. "But if it's dry I guess I'm broke again."

"Again?" Clara said.

The big man smiled. "Sure, I've been up and down, like

the rest of 'em, since I began at El Dorado, Kansas, fifteen years ago. I was there when the Stapleton No. 1 came in and I got hold of a good lease. I took a quarter of a million dollars in oil out of Butler County. But you know how it is. Dry holes are expensive and I drilled several of them on high-priced acreage down at Desdemona. I went broke again."

"It doesn't make sense to me," Clara said. "Wasn't a quarter of a million dollars enough?"

"It ought to be, and I did put a little aside for a good thing, and I think I have that good thing now."

"You bet you got a good thing," Cobb said. "I'll tell you this, Andrews. I had a geologist look this over, and he defined the structure as well as he could from surface geology, and your leases are sitting on it."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Cobb, because I want to talk to you one of these days about that proposition I put up to you before." He turned to Clara. "You see, I've followed oil around the world since El Dorado and I have a bug in my ear. What I've always wanted is to control a pool and produce the oil the way it ought to be produced, and of course make a million while I'm about it. You see, vast quantities of oil have been wasted in so many fields. The oil is down there in the rock and the reservoir pressure that would have brought it to the surface has been wasted away. The oil has lost its lighter fractions and the rest of it is down there like tar in the rock. It will never be recovered."

"If all this is for my benefit, I told you how I felt about it," Cobb said. He was looking at another car that had turned into the cowlot and stopped facing the derrick. The man in it did not get out.

"Between us we could do a real service, Walters," Will Andrews said. "It can be done. Some oil fields have been developed with little waste. In Russia they do it. Over in the Van field, where six majors control the structure and

pooled their interests, they're doing it. All it needs is for somebody to take the initiative and I think we could work out an agreement."

Cobb smiled at Clara. "You know who it is over in that car? It's our dry hole expert."

"Who?"

"Jesse Halliday."

Halliday saw them looking at him and got out of the car. He walked slowly toward them, chewing his cigar. He tipped his hat to Clara, then looked steadily at Cobb. "It seems you done all right for yourself."

"I sure did."

"And I got to hand it to you, Andrews," Jesse said. "I see you're done scouting."

"That's right. I'm done." The big man smiled. "You know, Jesse, I believe you let those leases go a little bit too soon."

Halliday scowled. "I still got a good lease. I bought back eighty acres that you missed up on, Andrews."

"I'm glad to hear it. When are you going to spud in a well?"

"Any day now." Jesse glanced at Cobb, started to speak, then turned back to his car.

Cobb watched him drive away. "I guess he's burned up, all right." He smiled at Clara. "I wonder if you could come to town with me. I want to show you something."

"Cobb, I have to go home pretty soon and give Nora a hand." She looked at his face. "Yes, I guess so. If it's all right with you, Will?"

"Sure it is."

"Then come get in my car," Cobb said.

As they drove to town Cobb said, "I don't understand why you don't throw all those people out. The biggest thing that ever happened in Lebanon is going on before your eyes and you want to stay home and make beds."

Clara, you're rich. You don't need to keep a boarding house."

"It's Nora, Cobb. You know she wouldn't turn anybody out when there's no place for them to go."

Cobb parked the car on the north side of the square. "Come with me a minute."

She followed him up the flight of stairs to the second-floor hall and ahead of them were the gold letters: *Cobb Walters Oil Company*.

"Well, for heaven's sake," she said.

"Come inside." He unlocked the door.

"But I thought it was the Lebanon Gas and Oil Company, Cobb."

"The furniture just came today," he said. "How do you like it?"

Clara inspected the office and said nothing.

"I got to get me a secretary," Cobb said. "I had Judy Barstow signed up. You remember her father had to close his drug store last summer, and she needed the job. But she walked out on me. They're paying typists ten dollars a day over at the abstract company and they're working nights abstracting titles."

Cobb led the way to his private office. Overlooking the street it was all glass, a huge pane of plate glass. He looked out at the square and grinned. "Look at me, Clara. I'm on top of the anthill. Yonder they are. Scrambling down there in the square. Scrambling for leases, scrambling for royalties, scrambling for a piece of land big enough to drill a hole, and I got there first. I got me a solid block of two thousand acres."

"You're feeling pretty powerful, aren't you?"

"Why not? Let me tell you something, honey. I got Ed Drum in with me and we went out and bought up all the stock we could in the old Nancy Hanks, and then I went to Oliver Wade and told him I had plenty of business for the railroad. I showed him the stock and we called a special

meeting of creditors and went to court for permission to reorganize and the old Nancy Hanks is going to run again. Honest, it broke Oliver's heart to see that get away from him."

"So you *own* the company, Cobb?"

"Just about. Ed and me control it."

"Are you going to change its name?"

He saw her eyes half-closed, her lips smiling faintly. "Why change its name? It's still the Lebanon and County Railroad."

"I thought it might be the Cobb Walters and County now."

He grinned. "No, it's the same old Nancy Hanks. Anyhow, we held a meeting and scraped up the money to recondition the line. I put four thousand dollars into it. The track walkers are already out there, and as soon as it's passed inspection the tank cars will be rolling. I got six per cent on the loan."

"Cobb," she said. "It's in your eyes like a snake."

"What is?"

"Power."

"Oh.—Well, why not?"

"Cobb, I remember once you said that oil causes a light in a man's eye that makes you wonder if you can ever civilize the human race. Cobb, you've got that light. Be careful."

"Careful of what?—Listen here, everything is changed now. I got what I'm after. I'm in! Hell, as soon as I get that oil to market I'll be making a couple of thousand bucks a day. Why, just yesterday I cleared four thousand dollars. In less than fifteen minutes, four thousand dollars. What do you think of that?"

"Poker again?"

"No. An old farmer, a friend of my folks, came up to me and said he'd been pestered about a lease on his land and they'd offered him fifty dollars an acre for it. He asked

me if I wanted to take it off his hands at that price and I said to give me a minute and I'd see. So I went up to the Lebanon House and finagled around and I ended up by selling it for a hundred dollars an acre to Leon Temple, a leaseman for the Trading Post Oil Company. Ain't that a laugh?—And you know, the old farmer couldn't get over it. He said he *bought* that farm for twenty-five dollars an acre and now he can get fifty dollars for it and the land is still his and he can go on farming it."

"I don't understand why you sold the lease."

"Hell, the old man's farm is a couple of miles the other side of Fossil Creek. There's no oil out there."

"Because it's east of that outcrop?"

"Say, you've learned.—So I got eight thousand for the lease and I gave four thousand to the old man and four thousand is mine. I lent it to the railroad."

"In other words, you lent it to yourself?"

"Just about."

"At six per cent?"

"That's right."

She shook her head slightly and got to her feet. "I suppose you're pretty smart, but, Cobb, you're beginning to worry me."

He smiled and said, "My head is still screwed on my shoulders." He stepped forward and took her hand. "Say, you've been hard to see lately."

"I have?"

"Let's get together. Let's have us a time. How about to-night?"

She hesitated an instant, then nodded. "All right."

"Good. I'll tell you what. Jack Vibart has turned his place into a sort of roadhouse and he's running wide open. He sells red whisky now and you can go right in and he'll serve you a drink. Want to go there tonight?"

"Sure."

"I'll drive you home, and then I have to go out to the Goback lease. We're making hole out there."

They started toward the stairs and she said, "If you can't sell the oil you've already got, why are you drilling another well?"

"I'll have a market pretty soon, and I'd have to do it as soon as I got a market, anyhow. I'll have to drill an offset to protect Goback. A long time ago the Supreme Court fixed what they call the law of capture. It's like a deer. You shoot a buck and it makes no difference whose land you shot it on, he's your buck. The same with oil. Whoever gets that oil to the top owns it, and if I kept running the Abernathy well and didn't drill on Goback's land I'd be draining the oil from under his feet. So I've got to drill an offset on his farm at the same distance from the common boundary as the Abernathy well. The first thing you know, Clara, I'll be drilling on that forty acres Nora owns."

Cobb let Clara off at the house on Persimmon Street and returned to town. As he entered the square he saw a tall girl standing in front of the Modern Beauty Shoppe, talking to Alma Jenkins, and his eyes brightened. There was a place to park and he turned the car to the curb.

"Hello, there," Jan called as he got out.

"Cobb, I've got you to thank for it," Alma Jenkins said as soon as he reached them.

"For what?"

"For the way my business is going to rack and ruin."

Cobb glanced inside the beauty shop, where women were waiting in line. "It looks like you're doing all right."

"Sure, I'm making money, but you should see some of them. I never had trade like this before and if it wasn't for the money I wouldn't even take 'em. There's one inside now, a big blonde down to the roots, down almost to the roots. Cobb, there's only one thing you can say about her. She's commercial, plain and simple."

Jan smiled. "Lebanon is growing up."

"Well, I don't like to have her in the Modern, but what can I do? She came back three times about an appointment and I had to make one."

A plump girl came to the doorway, opening a handbag that was shiny and new. Her hair was plastered flat to her round head and her eyebrows appeared to have been pulled out of line because of it. She paid Alma six dollars, and smiled. "Hello, Cobb."

"Hello, Dolly. How's everything?"

"Just fine." Dolly Goback was wearing white kid shoes, obviously new, and she was very careful in climbing into the buggy that stood at the curb.

Alma Jenkins smiled. "Dolly had the works. Facial, permanent, manicure. She said she wanted everything there was. First time she's ever been in the Modern. First time her hair ever had anything on it but rain water and a lick of hog soap."

"But you haven't made a well on the Goback place, have you, Cobb?" Jan asked.

"No, but the Gobacks sold part of their royalty."

"They're rolling in money now," Alma said. "Dolly says she's going to buy an auto and move to town. She'll catch somebody before Christmas."

"Just because of oil," Jan murmured.

"And my treatments, of course."

Cobb was looking at the public square, appraising how much it had changed, with crowds on the courthouse lawn where formerly the farmers had gathered, with automobiles packing the space which had formerly been congested only on market day, on Saturday afternoons when the farmers came to town. Now there was something purposeful in the groups of men and the talk was not of crops and weather. It was oil now they spoke of, and money. Leases and titles and royalties and working interests and thousands of dollars. There was a dice game twenty-four hours a day in the old Odd Fellows Hall, which a stranger had rented osten-

sibly to deal in leases. They even played craps on the courthouse steps, and so far there had been only a patient admonition from the sheriff, who was interested in the drilling of a well.

"Cobb," Jan said. "What are you up to these days?"

"Plenty." He smiled. "Protecting your investment." Alma Jenkins had returned to her work and they were alone. "I'm going to be needing your help pretty soon, Jan."

"How is that?"

"Well, I want to borrow a big lump of money and I thought I'd see Ardmore about it."

"Well, of course. Look, Cobb, why don't you come up and have dinner?"

"Sure."

"Tonight, then. How about tonight?"

"Well." Cobb hesitated. "You see . . ."

"Or any other night," Jan added. "But Father will be home tonight for sure and we can go to work on him. Can you make it tonight?"

"I guess so. Yes, tonight. Thanks, Jan."

She smiled and walked to her car.

When Cobb returned to the house on Persimmon Street it was twilight and there was a chill in the air. He found Clara in the parlor with Will Andrews. Cobb sat down, waiting for an opportunity to speak to her alone, and there was idle conversation. Will Andrews talked in his deep, slow voice of South America. He had prospected for oil in many states, in many countries, and he had returned from South America in that first depression year when field operations in Venezuela had been greatly reduced. He told Clara that night how they drilled for oil in the shoal waters of Lake Maracaibo and how the crude was transported in small tankers of shallow draft to clear the sandbar at the entrance to the lake. The tankers sailed in fleets to the re-

finery at Curaçao and they all had women's names. There was one called Clara, he said.

At last Cobb broke in, "Clara, something came up today and I've got to put through a deal. I'm afraid I'll have to call it off tonight, because it looks like I'll be busy until late."

Clara gave him a steady look. "Of course if it's important business, I understand."

"Yes, it's important. I'm sure sorry." He glanced at his wrist watch. "I got to go up and shave. I won't be here for supper." He hesitated, avoiding her eyes. "Maybe tomorrow night, Clara. How about it?"

"All right."

He went into the house, and when he was shaving he heard their voices below. He heard Will Andrews say, "I wonder if I can fill in?" And there was a pause, and the slow voice went on, "It's been rather solitary for me here in Lebanon. Won't you help me out?"

"If you really want to, then," Clara said.

Cobb grinned at his reflection in the mirror.

With winter coming on the Devants had moved to town, to their yellow house with a wide lawn and a brick wall and a windmill of colored tiles that Cobb had greatly admired as a boy. Jan met him at the door, and they went inside to a room where there were Oriental rugs and oil paintings on the wall, and big soft chairs with lace antimacassars. Cobb sat uneasily with Jan in front of the gas logs. Pruitt was not there, and Ardmore did not come out of his den until it was time for dinner.

Cobb was shy and embarrassed, but he felt a sense of pride in what he had accomplished. Only once before had he been inside this house, when in his boyhood he had carried a message from his father to Ardmore Devant and had waited on hardwood floors that were cool to his bare feet. But now he was a guest at dinner.

"Mr. Devant, we'll know pretty soon just what to expect

here in Lebanon," he said. "The Goback well is making hole fast and when it hits the pay it will be an oil field. The Lebanon field. I've got some ideas about how to develop it."

Ardmore looked across at him with an almost imperceptible nod.

"I'm building that loading rack and I'll have tank cars rolling the first thing you know," Cobb said. "We'll get our oil to market and there'll be some dividends for Jan."

Ardmore grunted. "My daughter feels that she's the better banker in the family because she invested in your company, Cobb."

Jan laughed. "Well, wasn't I right?"

"Yes, you were right. As it turned out."

Ardmore's was a knife-slit smile, and his eyes fenced with his daughter's. Cobb went on talking. "When we get a market I'm going to work in a big way. I'm going to drill up my leases fast, and one of these days I'm going to put up a plant to make casinghead gasoline."

Ardmore nodded, and offered Cobb a cigar. He sat far back in his chair, and Cobb noticed how frequently he glanced at Jan, how attentively he listened to everything that was said.

"Of course I've got to have a little cash," Cobb said. "Right now I'm needing money to complete that loading rack and get things under way, and later on I'll have need of more. I'd like to come to you for it, Mr. Devant."

"Cobb, I don't like to discuss business matters at home," Ardmore said. "But I think we can see our way clear to lending you some money. Why don't you come see me at the bank?"

"I will," Cobb said. "You can expect me in the morning."

When they left the table Ardmore retired to his study and Cobb sat with Jan in front of the gas logs. He was expansive as he smoked the cigar Ardmore had given him.

"Jan, this is just the beginning. It makes me dizzy to think about it. Some day I'll build a big refinery and I'll be selling Cobbco gas. I know it's going to happen."

Jan smiled. "You're going to be something, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

She watched the blue points of flame. "Pruitt and Father will never get over it. My putting money in your company, I mean. Cobb, I can't thank you enough for that." She looked at him and there was cold triumph in her brown eyes that made her resemble Ardmore. "This is one thing Father didn't manage. You have no idea the satisfaction that gives me."

Cobb did not understand. "I thought you and Ardmore got along all right."

"Of course we do. But I suppose it's because our temperaments are similar." She smiled and leaned back in her chair. "I remember when I was a little girl he gave me a steer. He wanted me to take an interest in the ranch and he gave me the steer to take care of myself."

"Yes, I remember. It was Scalawag. Wasn't that his name?"

"Yes. Scalawag. Remember how I worked? I fed him and I groomed him. I watched every breath he drew, and I'll never forget when he was in the arena at the fat stock show and the judge put his hand on Scalawag and Father's entry was runner-up. Runner-up to mine." She laughed. "He was so proud of his stock-breeding, and his daughter beat him out. You know, he was proud of me for it, but he was furious, too."

"Yes, I remember," Cobb said. "There's a photo of Scalawag down at the Chamber of Commerce."

"That's right. Well, I've done it again. I've got another Scalawag."

It depressed Cobb to be reminded of his childhood. He remembered the fat Hereford steer with the white curls on

its forehead. He remembered Jan when they had played along the creek, when she had been a superior being, always set apart. But then he thought that oil had made a change. He had discovered an oil field. He had two thousand acres of land. He was going to be the biggest independent in the business. By God, he was. It was the Cobb Walters Oil Company and it was going to be a power. Other men had started with as little. The big independents. Drug clerks, cowboys, drillers, barbers, reporters. They had started with as little and they had become big men in the oil industry. They had known how to take an opportunity when it came.

"Jan, maybe you think my head is swelled," he said.

"Oh, I don't think so, Cobb. Not any more than it has a right to be."

He nodded. "Maybe you still think of me as a farm boy down the road. But did you ever know that Frank Phillips was a barber? Did you know Harry Sinclair used to be a drug clerk? They began with no more than I did, and it was oil done it for them. Take Edward L. Doheny. He was a mule driver and a prospector and he was damn near broke when he dug for oil in Los Angeles with a pick and shovel."

"Do you want to be one of those, Cobb?"

"I don't see what there is to stop me. I know it sounds like I got a swelled head, but I know it's going to happen. I'll make me twenty million dollars."

He drew in a deep breath, and stared at the fire, and both were silent. At last Jan said softly, "I think you will, Cobb."

"People here don't see it yet," he said warmly. "They don't see that this thing is big.—Jan, we've got a big kite and we're going to fly it high."

"I'm with you," Jan said gaily. "I've got a rag in its tail and I want to see it soar. Cobb, more power to you!" She

laughed and put out her hand. He squeezed it and his eyes shone, but then he saw that she had risen to her feet.

He stood up. "I guess I better go home."

She withdrew her hand. "You go see Father in the morning. He'll let you have the money."

"Yes, I'll see him."

Jan went with him to the door, and they shook hands again. Cobb walked to his car with his head held high, his shoulders squared. It had not been just talk, he thought. He had meant every word of it. As soon as the Goback well came in he'd lay out a big campaign. There was a Trading Post test on the southeast slope. He'd stake an offset there, right away, and when it came in the biggest part of his spread would be proved up. Then the banks would come to him; he wouldn't need to go to the banks.

Cobb drove to Persimmon Street and parked his car under the bois d'arc tree. The garage still had a tenant. As he climbed the stairs to his room he was excited and happy. He switched on the light, and saw Clara sitting in a straight chair by the window, nervously lighting a cigarette. There was a moment's silence.

"Say, you startled me." He remained by the door.

"I couldn't sleep tonight," she said. She rose and sighed and stretched her arms. Her tone was casual. "I came in to steal a cigarette.—Did you put it over, Cobb?"

"Put what over?"

"Your business deal."

"Yes. Oh, yes." He moved slowly toward her. "Yes, it went off all right."

Clara puffed at her cigarette. "You used to tell me what was going on. Can't you see I'm dying of curiosity? What did you do, make four thousand dollars in ten minutes again?"

Cobb laughed uneasily. "No, it wasn't anything like that." He hesitated, and she turned her eyes away from his

searching look. Then he said crisply, "I was arranging to borrow some money from Ardmore Devant."

"Oh," Clara said.

"So I had dinner up at the Devant house tonight. I want to get Ardmore's backing, and he's letting me have some cash to pay for that loading rack."

Clara frowned slightly, and turned toward the door. He put out his hand. "Now you're not going?"

She met his eyes. "I think I'd better."

He smiled and pulled her toward him, but she remained stiff in his arms. "We're not getting anywhere, are we, Cobb?" she said.

"Ain't we? What do you mean, not getting anywhere?"

"I mean it's cooling off." She faced him, with her eyes half-closed. "Isn't it?"

"Of course it's not."

But the stubborn look in his eyes was plain to see. She said lightly, "Oh, well."

"I feel just the same," Cobb said.

"I wonder how you ever did feel." She kept her tone even.

"I told you that.—Clara, let's don't go into that question and answer routine again. Let's take things as they come."

She moved her shoulders slightly. "I suppose I did behave like a woman who had lost her head a little. And I did lose my head over you, Cobb. The same way you've lost your head over oil."

"My head is screwed on tight enough."

"Yes, you said that before."

"Clara, I can't figure you out. Are you trying to start an argument over nothing?"

"No. And I'm not really hard to figure out. Am I?"

Cobb did not speak, and she sighed and said, "Well, I think I'll trot off to bed. Thanks for the cigarette."

He stood in the center of the room, under the overhead light. The muscles of his cheeks were rigid and his eyes

were hard as he watched her go. She went slowly to the door and he knew that she was waiting for a word from him. But he did not speak. He watched her turn the knob and open the door and he watched the door close behind her.

18

TRAINS ran again on the tracks of the Lebanon & County Railroad. Pipe had been laid down the hill to the loading rack on the siding, and a string of empty tank cars rolled in to take on eight thousand barrels of petroleum that stood in earth storage where hundreds of barrels had soaked into the earth, evaporated, and run off down the road. Forty tank cars of eight thousand gallons' capacity each were hauled off to a refinery in Wichita Falls to which Cobb had contracted to deliver a hundred thousand barrels of crude.

At the refinery the oil had been tested and its gravity was thirty-nine degrees, A.P.I.; its gasoline content was thirty-five per cent; its kerosene content twelve per cent, and there was a large gas-oil content reducible by cracking. The posted price for crude of that grade was a dollar seven cents, but that was the pipeline price, and there was no pipeline. The best contract Cobb could make was sixty cents a barrel, loaded in tank cars at the rack.

But now Cobb had money in the bank. He had borrowed fifteen thousand dollars from the Lebanon National Bank, the company had sold eight thousand barrels of crude, and the daily receipts from the Abernathy well, which averaged two thousand barrels, were more than one thousand dollars, less the one-eighth royalty paid to Abernathy.

Already he had two drilling wells and two additional offsets staked. The fishtail bit of the Goback offset was grinding toward the pay, and on the southeast slope, a mile from the Abernathy well, Cobb had erected a rig as an

offset to a test of the Trading Post Oil Company. They were making hole fast in the outpost well, and he hoped to beat the Trading Post to the sand. Cobb wanted to push his drilling campaign, to develop his inside leases, but the costs were heavy. It was big money he was dealing in now. If only the price of oil would recover!

From the slope where the rig of the Abernathy well stood Cobb could count a half dozen drilling wells, and mule teams clogged the road and raised a powder of dust in the autumn air. He was standing there one day, watching the assembly of curved steel plates for another lease tank, when a truck arrived from the Witter Lumber Yard and planks were tossed off near Abernathy's shack. The old Negro approached Cobb. "I want you to show me where to put it. I don't want to git in yo' way."

"Put what, Abernathy?"

"My house. I'm gwan to buil' me a new house."

"Up here on the hill? Say, Abernathy, there'll be hundreds of oil derricks around here."

"Dat's right. I want to see what's gwan on." Abernathy grinned, and as he walked away there was a jingling noise at every step, for his pockets were filled with silver dollars.

The day after the first string of tank cars started off to the refinery with his oil Cobb moved to the Lebanon House, and he paid a premium to have a suite of rooms made available. He told Nora Joplin that he was very busy and could not keep normal hours, that he needed a headquarters other than the offices of the Cobb Walters Oil Company. To Clara he explained, "Remember what I told you about a man having front? That's everything. That's all there is to it."

"We're sorry to see you go, Cobb."

"But we'll see lots of each other. And I want you to help me out pretty soon, Clara."

"Help you with what?"

"Well, one of these days I'm going to build a house."

"Oh, good heavens," Clara said. "What in the world do you want with a house? You're all alone. You wouldn't even bother to keep it up."

"I'll find somebody to keep it up. You can put that down to front, too, Clara. A new house. Ain't that front?"

"You and old Abernathy," Clara said, and he did not like her slurring tone. He did not like the somewhat snappish way she treated him, and he did not see her often after that. He was too busy. He moved to the Lebanon House and every morning he went to his office and conferred with Sandy Lake, who was in charge of production for the company. Sometimes he met Clara on the square and he made excuses because he had not been to see her. He had staked locations for two more wells. They would be drilling in the Goback well any day now.

"You needn't apologize," Clara said. "But we do miss you and we'd like to have you stop around some evening."

"I'll sure do that."

"Nora keeps asking about you. She misses those knock rummy games. Cobb, how is your house coming along?"

"I haven't had time to think about it. Clara, I *am* busy."

She smiled. "Don't neglect your front, though, Cobb."

"I won't." His lips formed a stubborn line. "You think I harp on that too much, but I know it's important. Look here, you notice I don't say ain't near as much as I used to, and I don't use double negatives hardly at all."

"Cobb, I didn't think you knew what a double negative was. And you just used one."

"Well, I'm learning. I'm president of an oil company now. I'm going to be a big man in the oil business. I'm going to act like one and I'm going to talk like one."

"I believe you act like one already. You're pig-headed and you're out for yourself alone. That makes you an oil man, all right. You're a gambler and you're selfish. Yes, you have all the qualities of an oil man."

"Hey," Cobb said.

The color lessened in her cheeks and she smiled. "Oh, I guess I don't mean all that."

"Well, never mind," Cobb said. "Give my best to Nora."

Cobb decided not to build a house, but he talked to Ralph Paige about buying his white house on the knoll. Cobb wanted those Corinthian columns and those ordered trees and hedges and the rich white façade. Ralph said he would consider it, and Cobb dreamed of imported blue-grass sod from Kentucky, of a terraced lawn and peacocks to strut upon it.

Then a test west of Cobb's holdings was a dry hole, and the same day the Goback well reached the pay. Sandy telephoned him at the Lebanon House when they were ready to complete. It was nine o'clock at night.

"They finally moved in the spudder and the water string is cemented and dried. We're ready to drill in, Cobb."

"Then go ahead. I'll be out there."

Cobb drove to the Devant house and Pruitt met him at the door. "Is Jan here, Pruitt?"

Pruitt sucked his lower lip. "Yes, but she's gone to bed."

"How about telling her I'm here?"

"Look here, my friend, it's nearly ten o'clock."

"This is important," Cobb said. "You tell her we're drilling in at the Goback well and ask her if she wants to see it."

"Oh, you're drilling in."

"We're fixing to."

"All right, I'll see if Jan wants to go. Come in."

Cobb waited in a large room with bow windows from which he could see the courthouse tower and the lighted clock. He sat down in an overstuffed chair, and suddenly he realized that he was no longer awed by the Devants. He was not impressed by the oil painting in its heavy gold frame that hung above the fireplace; he knew now that it was a copy. And he reflected that he could buy better furniture than there was in this room, and he would do it.

He lit a cigarette and smoked it with satisfaction, letting the ashes fall on the Oriental rug.

Pruitt returned, gave Cobb an oblique glance. "She'll be down in a minute."

"Good. I thought she'd want to see it." Cobb gazed at the painting above the mantel. "I'm looking around for a house, Pruitt."

"A house?"

"I thought I might buy Ralph Paige's place, if I can come to terms with him."

"It's a fine house. Ralph spent a lot of money on it."

"It's kind of small, though."

"Small!" Pruitt stared at Cobb. "Fifteen rooms."

"I mean the land around it. I want to spread out. I want lots of room around my house."

"Well, why don't you buy up the houses on all sides and tear them down?" Pruitt suggested dryly.

"That's an idea," Cobb said, enjoying Pruitt's distaste.

He heard Jan's light footfall on the stairs and went to meet her. She wore a beige dress and Cobb raised his eyebrows. "Say, we're going to bring in a well."

"Yes. Pruitt said it's the Goback lease."

"You want to ruin them—those clothes?"

She glanced at the pale wool. "Oh, I don't care. Let's go."

On the way to the lease she smiled and said, "The Cobb Walters Oil Company! Cobb, that must give you a lot of satisfaction."

"It sure does."

"I mean you started from nothing and carried it through and formed your own company. I'm proud of you, Cobb." Her eyes were nearly closed. "What are you planning to do with all your profits?"

He grinned. "Well, first of all I'm going to build a house, a big house with lots of ground around it."

"For your family?"

Cobb realized that he had given no thought to his parents. "Yes, that's right. I'm going to move them to town, but I've got to have some room for Mom to raise chickens. She couldn't get along without chickens." He paused. "Later on I'm going to build myself a house."

"What do you want with two houses?"

"One for me," Cobb said. "I'm going to raise up a family of my own one of these days and my kids are going to have plenty of room to play. They're going to have Shetland ponies and a tennis court and a swimming pool and a baseball diamond and everything else a kid wants."

Jan glanced at him, nodded, and was silent. They passed the flare of the Abernathy well, and on the other side of the road was the tower of lights of the Goback rig. Cobb turned off through a gate in the barbed wire and stopped the car beside a mesquite tree. They got out and walked to the well.

The tall rotary derrick of structural steel had been taken down and moved to another location, and a spudder had been set up, a portable cable tool rig—a huge red machine with a blunt derrick raised like a fire ladder. Sandy Lake stood on the rig floor under the lights, and when he saw Cobb and Jan he stepped down into the grass and walked to meet them.

Cobb glanced at the line coming up out of the hole. "Bailing?"

"Yes, we ought to drilled into the sand now."

There was a certain tension. No one talked as the sand line came up out of the hole. It was wet. Back from the spudder, in the shadows, there were many people and Cobb saw John Goback at the gate of his house, a hundred yards away. His wife and four children were with him, and the oldest girl wore a belted white dress and white kid shoes, although summer had passed. Cobb smiled, remembering Dolly Goback a few years ago, when he had followed a thresher.

The bailer glided out of the hole, glistening and brown in the lights. Cobb stepped upon the rig floor and watched the tool dresser push the bail to the dump-box. A brown fluid rushed into the slush pit.

"It looks like she don't want to flow, Cobb," Sandy said. "We may have to swab some."

Cobb nodded, and he and Jan returned to his car while the tools were run into the hole and down to the bottom where the water string had been set in cement, a continuous tube of steel from the surface of the ground to the bottom of the hole 4,310 feet below, shutting off top water from the oil sand.

"Cobb, is everything all right?" Jan asked.

"Sure."

"It isn't a dry hole?"

Cobb smiled. "You watch and see."

But he was nervous. The bit had reached the bottom and drilling was resumed. Deep in the earth the bit lashed into the sandstone. On the surface of the land they waited tensely, watching the opening of the hole which had been drilled down through John Goback's cotton patch. They drilled six inches, a foot. Another foot. Then they brought the tools up again out of the hole. Cobb watched the opening of the hole, where the massive control head had been set up and cemented, and all eyes watched it. There were scouts, landowners, contractors, correspondents of the oil journals. It took two wells to make an oil field, and if this well came in it would be the Lebanon field.

The drill string came up black with oil and suddenly they heard the noise. In the bright lights they saw a thin puff of dirt and heard the clatter of gravel on the rig floor, and deep down below there was a rumble, a deep, increasing rush of sound.

The driller leaped to the Christmas tree and turned a handwheel, closing the valve, and an instant later the control head began to vibrate. He turned another wheel and

from a pipe projecting over the slush pit there came a sudden rush of fluid, a light brown color at first, then deepening to a dark sienna in the electric lights.

Oil splattered into the slush pit and a film of gas rose in the night. The wind caught the spray and blew it toward the Goback house. Where they stood, a hundred feet from the well, drops of oil fell around Cobb and Jan.

"It's an oil field now," Cobb said, and drew a deep breath. "Jan, it's the Lebanon oil field now."

They watched the crude pour into the slush pit and flow against the piled-up earth at the other end. Jan glanced at Cobb. "You were worried about it!"

"No, I wasn't. Not for a minute."

"Cobb!"

"Well, a little bit, then."

The crowd pressed in closer and passed them by. From the gate in their picket fence the Goback family came forward to look at the greasy, odorous fluid that would make them rich. For them there would be no more scraping in the rugged soil, no more back-breaking work, no more relation to the realities that had always been for them. Dolly Goback walked to the edge of the slush pit and looked down. Her squat body was tense; her broad face smiled. She did not speak. She stared at the swirling crude oil and suddenly she leaned over and took off her white kid shoes, the new shoes that were the first kid shoes she had ever owned. She took them off and laughed and kicked them into the slush pit, into the oil.

Cobb took Jan's hand and led her forward. He called to Sandy Lake, "What do you think she will gauge?"

"It's a big one, Cobb. We're going to turn her into the tank now."

"Okay."

Sandy was busy with the valves at the control head, turning the flow of oil into a four-inch pipe leading to one of three looming shapes of the steel flow tanks. The rush of

oil into the slush pit slackened and suddenly ceased. They heard the vibration as the crude poured through a one-inch choke into the flow line.

"Sandy," Cobb said. "You get busy and have a gas trap set up in the morning."

"Okay, Cobb. And see here, what about running tubing? You're producing the Abernathy well through the production string and you're wasting pressure that way. We ought to run tubing in both these wells."

Cobb frowned. "Come in and talk to me in the office tomorrow morning. We got a lot of things to work out."

"The Railroad Commission will be down here to see you run tubing, the first thing you know," Sandy said. "They'll be down here and establish field rules the first thing you know."

Cobb shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, just the other day they issued an order setting the total allowable for Texas at six hundred and eighty thousand barrels, and Lebanon is included in that order."

"That means nothing," Cobb said. "They included us just in case our production got big. For that matter, they included that Joiner field in East Texas in the order, too, and they already had a couple of dry holes over yonder."

Dolly Goback came up to Cobb in her stocking feet. Her brown eyes shone in her gray face. "Cobb, Maw wants you to come in the house. She wants everybody in the house. She fried some chickens and baked three cakes and she wants everybody in to eat it."

"You bet." Cobb smiled. "Dolly, you're a rich woman. What are you going to do with all the money?"

"Oh, we're going to move to town, Cobb. We're going to get a house with bathrooms and a garage and we're going to buy an auto and have a colored girl to do the work."

She went away, walking unflinching over the rough ground where she had run so often barefoot, where she

had hoed cotton and picked the ripe bolls and plowed the sticky black earth.

Cobb turned, and pointed one finger at Jan. "Look at you. Look at your dress."

The beige wool was covered with dark brown spots. "It's polka dots," she said. "Maybe I'd better throw it in the slush pit after Dolly's shoes."

"I told you you'd ruin it," Cobb said. "But I'll buy you a new dress, Jan. I'll buy you a hundred new dresses."

"*You* will, Cobb?"

"I will if you'll marry me." The impulse broke through his restraint and he had said it, and now he stood gazing at her, with his mouth open slightly.

"Why, Cobb, I . . . Goodness."

"I guess I'm pretty crude." His face was flushed. "I oughtn't to said it. I hadn't meant it like that."

"Well, don't apologize. You surprised me, Cobb. I never thought you . . . Well, Cobb, this *is* so sudden." She laughed, and then her brown eyes were regarding him steadily. "Golly, give me a minute."

Cobb caught his breath and his heart raced. "Then will you, Jan?"

She hesitated, moistened her lips, then said quietly, "Yes, I will, Cobb."

Cobb stared at her. He still felt apologetic, and he could not believe it. The gap there had always been in his mind was closing and for the first time in his life he felt complete. Himself. Cobb Walters. He stared at her and he was unable to move.

"Cobb, is that all?" Her voice seemed unsteady. "Aren't you going to kiss me or something?"

Slowly, almost reverently, Cobb moved forward. He put his arms around her, not daring to hold her tight. He kissed her cheek, her cool lips. Then he drew back, stammering, "I haven't got a ring. I ought to had one, Jan, but I don't know about those things. I—I'll get one tomorrow."

"A ring isn't important, Cobb."

He held her again, more sure of himself, and his kiss was hard, exultant. He breathed quickly and a new strength was released in him. Now he was masterful, self-confident. All was changed. Like striking oil, it was easy. It was so easy.

"Jan, I love you," he whispered. "Come away with me. I want to tell you."

He took her hand and drew her back into the shadows, beneath the trailing fringes of the mesquite tree, where they were hidden by his car. A mesquite thorn brushed against his face and he did not notice the scratch.

"Ever since I can remember I worshiped you, Jan. I plain worshiped you. I told you I always looked on you as a sort of princess. You were a princess in my day dreams and now it's come true. I can't quite get it through my head."

She stood with lowered eyes, her face pale in the shadows.

"I was making plans to build a house," Cobb said in a vibrant tone. "I was hoping it was a house for you to live in. I was hoping, but I never thought it would come true. Jan, it's going to be the finest house this town ever saw. . . ." She had moved her head slightly, raised her eyes, and Cobb sucked in his breath. "Honey?"

"Yes?"

"You ain't said anything. You meant it, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't say how you felt about me."

Her voice was very low. "Cobb, I never knew what my feelings were until tonight, until just now. I'm still mixed up."

"But do you?"

"Can't you tell?" Her fingers touched his cheek, and they were cold, then her hand slipped to his shoulder and rested lightly there.

"But you do, Jan?"

"Yes."

Cobb kissed her, and after a moment she turned her head. "We're in plain sight here, Cobb."

"Who cares? I want everybody to know. I want to shout it out."

She shook her head. "No, listen, it's got to be a secret. I have to break the news at home, don't you realize that?"

"Yes," Cobb said. "I wonder how Ardmore will take it."

"He won't be overjoyed." Jan said it with a certain satisfaction.

"I guess not."

"But I can handle Father." She smiled. "It takes a little time, but I can always bring him around."

"How much time?" Cobb asked. "When is it going to be?"

She laughed softly.

"I don't know much about these things," he said. "I know women set the date, though. Jan, let's set it soon."

"All right, Cobb. Soon."

"When?"

She moved past him to the car. She got in, and waited until he followed her. "In the first place Father is going to be a problem. He'll want to interfere, as he did before, and . . ." She stopped talking.

"Before," Cobb said. "I'd clean forgot you were married before." She had turned her head toward the bright lights of the derrick and he looked at the contour of her cheek. "I never knew anything about that guy. Who was he, Jan?"

She moved her shoulders slightly. "It's all forgotten now, Cobb. It's just meaningless now."

"You eloped or something, didn't you?"

"Yes. You remember I was up in New York a year, studying ceramics and I . . . Oh, Cobb, let's don't go into that. It's all forgotten."

"I remember he was somebody from up north," Cobb said.

"No, he comes from Dallas, Texas. I met him up there, that's all." She put her hand on his arm and moved closer to him. "You don't care, do you?"

Cobb shook his head. "I just want you for mine. All for mine. If it's that way I don't care."

"It's that way, Cobb. Honestly, it didn't mean anything."

He started the engine. "I don't know as I like that." He turned the car and drove over the cattle guard to the road. "I'd rather it did mean something."

"Well, it . . . well, I was young and of course I *thought* it meant something. Of course I did." Her cheeks were flushed. "Please, let's don't talk about that. It's all forgotten."

"I'm sorry." Cobb forced a laugh. "Here I am, a man who just struck oil, and I'm complaining it didn't come up in labeled lube cans. Jan, I'm as happy right now as I've got any right to be and I just can't put it in words. If it wasn't that I loved you so damned much I wouldn't . . . Well, I love you, and that's that."

The clasp of her fingers tightened on his arm. "Thank you, Cobb."

"It's forgotten here, too," Cobb said. "I already forgot it."

He circled the public square and drove up the hill to the Devant house. The lights were out, except for a dim bulb that had been left burning in the hall for Jan. She opened the door and slipped out of the car before Cobb could stop her.

"Now wait," he said.

"It's very late." She smiled. "I want to be alone a minute, Cobb. I've got to turn around and think. I can't quite realize all that's happened."

"Neither can I," Cobb said. "Wait. I want to see my future wife to the door."

He walked with her over the flagstones to the porch, and put his arms around her. Her kiss was quick and light,

and then she drew back. Even when she was in his arms it seemed that she held herself back from him. She whispered, "Goodnight, darling," and went into the house.

As Cobb drove down the hill he grinned and his foot trembled on the accelerator. It was true that he was as happy as he had any right to be. His whole being was uplifted, and even the car seemed hardly to touch its wheels to the ground. The dark trees flashed past and the street lights winked like beacons at the corners. The public square rushed toward him. He was driving sixty miles an hour.

And then he remembered that he had to tell Clara.

19

THE next morning Cobb could not listen to figures. He could not think about two and one-half inch tubing at thirty cents a foot, about costs of staking offsets to the Goback well. He told Sandy Lake to order the tubing, to talk to the supply dealer and the contractor, to report to him that evening.

And as soon as Sandy had gone he telephoned the Devant house. Jan answered the call. "Darling, I hoped it was you. I want you to call me every morning. As soon as you're awake, I want you to call me. I want you to think of me the first thing when you wake up."

"I never stop thinking about you, Jan," Cobb said. "Did you tell him? Did you tell your father?"

"I haven't even seen him yet. I slept late."

"I couldn't even sleep," Cobb said. "Jan, when are you going to tell him?"

"I have to do it in easy stages. You know Father."

"I sure do." Cobb grinned at the telephone. "I don't care. I just wanted to make sure it was all true. That's all I wanted."

Cobb went to see Ralph Paige at the Chamber of Commerce. He ran up the stairs to the second-floor office, and when he opened the door he saw Nancy Jo Paige sitting at her father's desk. She waved her hand. "Good morning, Cobb."

"Hello. Where's Ralph?"

"He went out for a while. I'm in charge of Lebanon's destiny for a few minutes. What can I do for you?"

"I came to see Ralph about buying your house," Cobb said. "I talked to him before."

There was a curious quirk at the corners of the girl's lips and her eyes had a speculative gleam. "So you're going to turn me out of house and home, Cobb?"

"Do you mind?"

"In a way, yes. That place is too big for us, but it's my home.—Cobb, sit down and tell me all about it."

"About what?"

"About why you want a big place like that. I know there's a reason."

"I want a place for my folks," Cobb said.

"Oh." She smiled. "Got a cigarette, Cobb?"

He took out a package, struck a match for her. The smile lingered on her face, and she sat watching him. For a time neither of them spoke, then Nancy Jo asked, "Cobb, what's the matter?"

"I don't follow," he said. "Nothing that I know of."

She showed her teeth in a smile that was twisted to one side of her face, to the left side. Her eyes were bright. "You haven't been to see me. You haven't called me up. Oh, I know Clara is back in town. But still . . ."

"You know how busy I am. We brought in the Goback well last night. It gauged four thousand barrels."

"Yes, I heard." She dropped her cigarette on the floor and stepped on it. "Cobb, you don't need to be afraid of me. I'm not after you. I'm not a grasping woman."

"I never thought you were."

"I'm not a clinging vine, either."

"No." Cobb shook his head slightly.

"In a way I'm like a man," Nancy Jo said. "I'm as direct as you are, Cobb."

"More so, probably."

She reached nervously for her cigarette, forgetting that she had put it out. Her hand returned and clutched the other in her lap. "Cobb, you like me, don't you?"

"Sure I do."

"Then why don't you come around? I don't care if you're in love with Clara, if you are. I don't care about that."

"What makes you think I'm in love with Clara?"

"But aren't you?"

"No."

Nancy Jo's eyes narrowed. "I don't care if you are."

"So you wouldn't be taking me away from anybody," Cobb went on evenly.

Her laughter was genuine. "Oh, Cobb, how simple of you. Spoken just like a man who thinks he's an expert on women. I thought you knew me better than that." She stood up and spread her hands. "Cobb, I told you the truth. I just like to be with you. I think you're fun. Don't you understand that?"

Cobb glanced up, and said in a tone of relief, "Here comes your father, crossing the square."

Nancy Jo turned and went to the window, her lithe body swaying. She tapped one foot on the floor, then faced Cobb. "Well, I've said it, Cobb."

She stood looking at him. Her lips were smiling and her eyes were a deep violet color. Cobb got to his feet. "Listen, Nancy Jo, I've got something to tell you. I'm going to be married."

"Oh." She lowered her eyes. "Clara didn't tell me."

"It's not Clara," Cobb said. "I'm going to marry Jan Devant."

Nancy Jo's eyes opened wide, and then she laughed. "So! You're going to take the statue off the pedestal? Cobb, I might have known it."

Cobb flushed. He did not speak.

"Is it boyhood frustration, Cobb? Is that what it is? You've made a lot of money and you're going to get everything you've always wanted. So you're getting Jan Devant. Is that it? And you're getting our house, too. Of course

that's it." She put out her hand. "Cobb, congratulations. I mean it, too. It's quite a feat, getting Jan Devant. It must make you proud."

"You're damn right it does," Cobb said stiffly. He had to take her hand in his, and he was very uncomfortable.

"Tell me, Cobb. Of course it's none of my business, and I know I'm a nosey woman, but does Clara know it?"

"Nobody knows it. It's a secret."

"A secret?" Nancy Jo laughed. "Well, not any more, sonnyboy. You can't expect *me* to keep quiet about it."

"Hello, there," Ralph Paige said as he entered the office. "Hello, Cobb." He looked at their clasped hands. "What's all this?"

"I was just congratulating Cobb," Nancy Jo said, with a teasing smile.

"What about?"

"Hadn't you heard?" She turned her smile to Cobb, enjoying his flushed, angry look. "The Goback well came in last night for four thousand barrels."

"I heard you made a well, Cobb. I didn't know it was four thousand barrels, though."

"That's right. She filled a thousand-barrel flow tank in six hours."

"Say, that's fine. So we've got a real oil field now. A real oil field.—Say, they seem to have a pretty good pool over in East Texas, too. Have you been reading about that?"

"Yes, but it ain't a major field, Ralph. They've had a couple of dry holes and there was a piece in one of the trade journals that it was too far east in the basin to be a major Woodbine pool. It won't be like Van."

"I sure hope not. The price of oil is down enough as it is. Cobb, what can I do for you?"

"I came in to talk to you about your house."

Ralph moved over to his desk and Cobb glanced at

Nancy Jo, with his mouth drawn down at the corners.
"Well, thanks for that."

She smiled. "You're an easy mark, Cobb."

"Anyhow, thanks."

"Oh, I'll keep my mouth shut. Don't worry about that."
She shrugged her shoulders, eyebrows raised. "At least I'll try to. But it's awfully hard, Cobb."

"What are you two talking about?" Ralph Paige asked.
"Look here, Cobb, about selling that house. I talked it over with Nancy Jo."

"Yes?"

"Well, I guess it's up to her."

Cobb glanced at the girl. She pressed her lips together.
"And Nancy Jo says no."

Cobb frowned. "You won't sell it?"

"No. You see, Cobb, it's my home." She smiled. "I don't like to think of—of other people living in it."

"There now, hon," Ralph said. "We're not going to sell it, then, and don't you fret about it.—Cobb, why don't you build?"

"I had that in mind."

"I know a real fine lot. You've seen it, I guess. A block north of our place, on Sycamore Street."

"Yes, I believe I know it."

"You can get a good bargain on it."

"I'm going to look it over, then. Thanks anyway, Ralph." He looked at Nancy Jo, saw her smile, and answered it sourly. Then he walked back to his office.

As he climbed the stairs he knew that he had to tell Clara at once. He had to tell her before Nancy Jo did, and from the office he put through a call to the house on Persimmon Street. Clara answered.

"This is Cobb."

"I know."

"Can I see you this evening?"

"I'm sorry, Cobb. If you'd called earlier . . . But I have a date."

"Oh, you have?" Cobb frowned. "Well, can I see you for a few minutes? Suppose I drive by now."

"All right, if you want to. What is it, Cobb?"

"I'll be around in ten minutes." He hung up.

She was waiting on the porch, and she came out to the car when he beckoned to her. "Let's ride around the block or something," he suggested, and held the door open for her.

She got in, and Cobb drove slowly away. He watched the road as if traffic were very heavy, and said at last in a low tone, "I'm going to start building a house right away."

"Are you?"

Cobb turned the corner and took the north highway out of town. Ahead of them were the derricks of the Lebanon field.

"I don't have much time," Clara said. "I have to be home at noon to meet Will. He's taking me out to the field."

"I'll get you there in time." He paused, then said, "Clara, there's something I want to tell you."

"Yes?"

"For one thing, I want to thank you. I appreciate all you and Nora have done for me. You really started me off. You built a fire under me and got me going. You helped me in a lot of ways."

She said quietly, "Come to the point, Cobb." From the corners of his eyes he saw that her face was pale, her lips were set.

"All right, I'll come to the point. I'm going to get married." He hesitated an instant. "It's Jan Devant."

Clara nodded. "I'm not surprised. I knew it was always Jan."

"Did you?" he said slowly.

"I'm not blind, Cobb."

"Well, I— Well, I wanted to tell you first." He stopped the car, backed up, and turned back toward Lebanon.

Clara seemed to smile. "What did you expect me to say, Cobb? Did you expect me to raise the roof? Jan is a nice girl, and I don't blame you or anything. I always knew how you felt about Jan, and me. Cobb, it's all water over the dam now."

"Yes," Cobb said, and there was a perverse ache in his throat.

"You two will get along," Clara said. "The first thing you know, Cobb, you're going to know which fork to use and all that." She laughed and patted his hand lightly. "Remember when I used to call you Corncob?"

"Yes."

"Really, you still are, and it's one of the nicest things about you. It will be a shame to see you with your hair combed and your chin shaved and wearing a derby hat. But you'd better not do that. Don't wear a derby, Cobb."

"Where does a hat come in? What's that got to do with it?"

"Or striped pants," Clara said. "Oh, God, no."

"Listen," Cobb said. "I'm not going to change any."

"But front, Cobb! How about front?"

He scowled. "If that's what you mean, Jan ain't front and you know it."

Clara smiled and said nothing.

"I want to stay friends with you," Cobb said. "If we can work it out that way."

"Of course we're still friends." She glanced at him slyly. "But you know what that means, Cobb. It means we say what we think, just as always. It means I'll tell you just what I think of whatever you do, and you'll have to take it."

"Sure."

"I hope you can take it, because I don't think you're

going to want my opinions, unless they agree with yours. You're not going to want my criticisms, Cobb."

"You got the wrong idea about me, Clara. Just think back a minute. I'm a farm boy, sure. I grew up with dirt under my toes. But I got away from that. I learned the oil business and I'm in the chips. Of course I feel set up, but I'm no different from what I was. I'm going to make a place for myself, a big place, and the only difference now is that instead of dreaming about it I'm going to do it."

"It's a big difference," Clara said. "It makes a big difference whether you've got the dirt under your bare toes or under twenty-dollar shoes."

He grinned. "It's twenty-dollar shoes from now on."

He turned the corner into Persimmon Street and drove between the lines of sycamores to Clara's house. As he brought the car to a stop she put out her hand.

"Friends then, Cobb, or we'll try our best to be."

"You bet." He took her hand.

"And my best wishes, too. I mean that."

Will Andrews came down from the porch, walking with a stiff, upright carriage as if he wore high-heeled boots. There was a certain restraint about the man that Cobb did not like. He did not like his smile as he came up to the car, put his foot on the runningboard and his big hand on the handle of the door.

"Did you hear the news?" Will asked. "The Trading Post made a well."

Cobb shook his head. "Where was that?"

"West of your discovery well. Just west of your leases, I believe."

"Yes, I know the test. How big a well?"

"Two to three thousand barrels, they say, flowing through a one-inch choke. I haven't been out there yet. The talk is that the Tropok will lay a gathering line over from its trunk line. So we'll have a buyer for our oil."

"Oh, that's fine," Clara said.

"Not for me," Cobb said. "It means I got to offset that well."

He drove to his office and looked at the huge map on the wall, drawn to the scale of four hundred feet to the inch. On it was marked the location of the Abernathy well, the Goback offset, the outpost well on the southeast slope, and two other wells which he must drill to protect the landowners from drainage of the oil beneath their land. On the map was a small circle marking the Trading Post test, which had come in that day. It was on peach orchard land that belonged to Ralph Paige, near the property line of one of Cobb's leases, and he would have to offset it.

Cobb frowned and went down the stairs, and on sudden impulse he turned toward the Lebanon National Bank.

Mr. Devant was busy, he was told. Mr. Devant was in conference. Cobb went to Pruitt's window and said it was important that he see Ardmore, and two minutes later he was seated across the desk from the bank president and Pruitt was standing nearby.

"I suppose you heard the Trading Post made an oil well," Cobb began. "That makes one more offset I've got to drill, and I'm going to need some money."

"Well, Cobb, I believe we can arrange to increase your loan," Ardmore said. "It's fifteen thousand dollars, I believe."

"That's right, and I'll need more than that. I had to put that into building my loading rack. You see, the Trading Post has drilled in right on the line. I've got to put down an offset there, and probably more offsets on the line, because most of those leases are in small tracts. I'll have to offset every well that's drilled out there."

Ardmore nodded, and glanced at Pruitt.

"I'm laying out a drilling campaign," Cobb said. "Already I got two wells under way and I've got to stake three more. Ardmore, I'm going to start developing my

inside leases and the first thing you know I'll be drilling twenty wells."

"Twenty wells, is it?" Ardmore whistled softly. "That's a lot of oil wells."

"Yes, I'll require two or three hundred thousand dollars to see me through."

"Two or three hundred thousand?" Ardmore stared at Cobb. "Boy, have you lost your sense of reality?"

Cobb grinned. "Reality has sure changed for me, and that's a fact. But this has gotten to be a big proposition, Mr. Devant." He felt important, and he lit a cigar. "The way I see it, this is a big opportunity for me and for Lebanon and the Lebanon National Bank, too. The biggest opportunity any of us ever saw. But if you can't swing it, that's all right."

"It's not a question of can or can't," Ardmore said, and Cobb did not like his smile. "But three hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money. Cobb, I wonder if you'd take a piece of advice?"

"I'll sure listen to it."

"Why don't you sell out to the Trading Post Oil Company?"

"Sell out? No, sir. I'm on top of this anthill, Mr. Devant, and they ain't going to buy me off and they ain't going to shake me off."

"I happen to know they'd be willing to make you an interesting offer. Up in seven figures, Cobb. I believe you could get a half million in cash and twice that sum out of the first quarter production of the oil."

"Where did you hear that?"

"It was just a hint, Cobb. Just a hint. They do business with us and they happened to let out they'd consider buying your leases."

"Then it seems to me that's a pretty good indication of the value of my leases as collateral for any kind of loan," Cobb said, and smiled.

"Cobb, we're not dubious about the value of your leases. That doesn't enter into it."

"But still you're not interested in making me a loan?"

"I didn't say that, Cobb. On the contrary, we're happy to have your business. But more than a quarter of a million dollars! Cobb, this bank has never made a loan of such proportions, and I don't believe it ever will." He chuckled. "If anybody had ever said the day would come when young Cobb Walters would walk in and ask me for three hundred thousand dollars . . ." His face became sober. "Cobb, I wouldn't have the face to bring it up before the board. I actually wouldn't. Unless I . . ."

"Unless what?" Cobb asked.

"Unless there was a very compelling reason, my boy."

Cobb's eyes were half-closed. He puffed his cigar and blew out smoke. "Would fifty shares of stock in the Cobb Walters Oil Company be a compelling reason? Fifty shares at a reasonable figure. Say two hundred dollars a share."

Ardmore and Pruitt exchanged glances and when the banker looked again at Cobb there was a tightness around his mouth.

"Let's put our cards on the table," Cobb said. "I want you working with me, Ardmore. I don't want you working against me. I'd like to have you in my company, as a personal proposition, so that I could have the benefit of your advice. Fifty shares is a ten per cent interest, and loan or no loan, I'd like to have you come along."

Ardmore stared across at Cobb, the cigar rigid in his mouth. "Cobb, you ought to know that isn't the way this bank does business. . . ."

"I'm talking to you, not the bank," Cobb said. "I ain't offering that as a compelling reason."

"Then talk no more about it," Ardmore said.

Cobb's face flushed, and he felt less acute than he had. He felt the rebuke. He said slowly, "Well, I can take and

sell off some leases and raise the money I need. But I don't want to do that. I want to develop that field myself."

Ardmore shook his head. "I'm afraid it's out of the question, Cobb. You see, according to the letter of the law we aren't supposed to make any single loan which is greater than ten per cent of our combined capital and surplus. That's half a million. So we aren't supposed to make a single loan greater than fifty thousand dollars."

"Well, all right," Cobb said. "I'm sorry it can't be worked out, because I'd like to keep this thing in the family."

"In the family?" Ardmore glanced at Pruitt.

"Me and Jan are going to get married," Cobb said. "Jan wanted to tell you first, but there it is. I asked her to marry me and she said she would."

Ardmore could not speak. He was bent over, with his hands on the table, as if he had a sharp pain in his chest.

"I meant to let Jan tell you," Cobb said quickly, "I guess it's unexpected." He smiled uncertainly. "But that's the way it is."

Color returned slowly to Ardmore's face; his hands were clenched into fists. His voice whispered, "Get out of here."

"Wait a minute," Cobb said. "I'm in a position to take care of Jan now. I'm president of the Cobb Walters Oil Company and I'm rich. I've admired her ever since I was a kid and I'm proud to be in a position to marry her."

Pruitt was staring at Cobb, and the readjustment that was taking place showed in his face.

Ardmore's face was gray. "I said get out."

"All right," Cobb said. "I'm sorry you feel that way about it. I thought we could work together, Mr. Devant, and I . . ."

"Good day," said Ardmore.

Cobb hesitated, about to speak in anger, then he turned and walked out of the bank.

An hour later the telephone in his office rang and it was Jan. "Cobb, you've done it. You've certainly done it."

Cobb was uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, honey. It sort of slipped out."

"I don't know what you said, but Father feels insulted about it. He said you went out of your way to be insulting. Cobb, what *did* you say?"

Cobb was confused. "Well, I—Jan, I know I haven't got any tact. I guess I did it all wrong, and I'm sorry. Say. Listen. It don't make any difference with us, does it?"

Her voice sounded far away. "Of course not. Silly.—But, Cobb, you'd better not come around tonight."

"But, Jan, I wanted to . . . I hoped . . ."

"I told you to let me handle it, darling. Now look, you come to dinner tomorrow night and in the meantime I'll work on Father. Just keep away from him, will you, Cobb?"

"Sure."

"I'm pretty important to Father, in a lot of ways," Jan said, and laughed softly. "He has a lot of money invested in me, Cobb. Ten thousand dollars. Ten thousand dollars for my education. He's a banker, and he doesn't want to lose his investment."

"He's not losing it," Cobb said.

"That's what I have to convince him of. I'll have to draw up a balance sheet." She laughed again, and the sound was not reassuring. "But don't worry about it. I told you I could handle him, but for heaven's sake let *me* do it."

"Yes, sure," Cobb said. "Jan, I'll never make another mistake like that."

After he had hung up Cobb sat staring at the telephone. He felt unsure of himself, and that night he bought a pint of whisky and remained in his room at the Lebanon House.

20

THEY sat at dinner in the Devant house and Jan carried the burden of the conversation. There was high color on the broad planes of her cheeks and the gaiety of her manner emphasized Ardmore's stiff silence. Ardmore did not look at Cobb, and hardly spoke until they were having coffee after dinner, when he said, "I've given considerable thought to your proposition, Cobb." He bit the end off a cigar and Cobb glanced blankly at Jan.

"You know," Ardmore went on, "it's pretty big for the bank and we might need some help. I talked to Harvey Fleming at the City Bank and you know how it is, most bankers are interested in an oil proposition, and Harvey is interested in this one. Maybe something can be worked out."

Ardmore got up from the table and led the way to the gallery. Then, puffing his cigar, he went for a stroll in the garden.

"He wants you to follow him, Cobb," Jan said.

Cobb looked down at her. "I can't figure him out. What did he say?"

"Well, I guess we're engaged." Jan smiled bleakly.

Cobb took both her hands. "Jan, I sure am sorry. I made a mess of it, all right."

"Don't take it too seriously. You know how they are. Pruitt wasn't even here tonight." She shook her head slightly. "I don't care, but I do want it to be fun, being engaged. I want to be excited about it."

"Honey, I'm excited," Cobb said.

"Oh, so am I.—But go on, Cobb. He's waiting for you."

Cobb found Ardmore by a flower bed. When he came up Ardmore gave him a sharp glance and said at once, "A quarter of a million dollars is a lot of money to fool around with, Cobb. We'd have to have choice leases as collateral."

"Sure thing," Cobb said.

Ardmore tossed his cigar butt into the flower bed, where fertilizer was thickly tilled. "Cobb, it would have to be two separate loans. Remember, I told you that we're only allowed by law to lend fifty thousand dollars, that is, ten per cent of our combined capital and surplus."

"Yes."

"Well, we could make two loans. One to your company and a like sum to you personally." Ardmore's neck seemed to draw in, emphasizing the turtle-like wrinkles. I've been trying to work out a plan that would meet all objections, legal and otherwise. If we do let you have all that money, and I said *if*, it would be on a discount basis and it would have to be a short term loan."

"I'm not clear about a discount basis," Cobb said, and he was beginning to wonder if Ardmore had forgotten Jan.

"Well, suppose we lend you two hundred thousand dollars, and that's as far as we can go, then we turn over two hundred thousand to you but the face amount of the note would be two hundred and twenty thousand."

"I see," Cobb said.

"The City Bank will come in for fifty thousand and we'll swing the rest," Ardmore said.

"I guess two hundred thousand will do it," Cobb said.

Ardmore's eyes flickered and the corners of his lips twitched, but he went on evenly, "So the Lebanon National will lend your company fifty thousand and the City Bank will add fifty thousand to it. Then my bank will lend you fifty thousand and I'll lend you fifty thousand myself. That's to you personally, Cobb, and we'll have to have part of your stock in the company as collateral."

Cobb nodded.

"Those loans will be repayable in quarterly installments, and I'll have to ask you to rewrite the note for fifteen thousand you already negotiated so that it will mature on the same terms." Ardmore faced Cobb. "Well, that's the picture."

"I don't know," Cobb said. "I'll have to think it over, Mr. Devant."

"Certainly. Suppose we let it go for a few days." Ardmore looked steadily at Cobb, hesitated, moistened his lips. He drew his head back and said in a slow, flat tone, without emphasis or emotion, "Cobb, I've talked it over with my daughter and apparently she has made her choice. Speaking frankly, I have offered opposition, but I have never dictated to Jan. If she wants to marry you, you have my consent."

"Thank you, Mr. Devant. I'll do my best to be a good husband. There never was a girl like Jan."

Ardmore sighed. "Suppose we go back to the house, then. There's a chill."

They did not shake hands, and Ardmore led the way in silence to the porch, where Jan was waiting. Ardmore went into the house, leaving Cobb alone with Jan.

"I can see I ain't welcome," Cobb told her. "But I never expected to be. As long as I got you, Jan, I don't care. All I care about is when is it going to be? You said you'd make it soon."

"Father wants us to wait until spring, Cobb."

"Spring! That's months away. Jan, I thought it would be in a week or two."

She smiled. "Darling, I'd just as soon it was today. But Father has been sweet as a lamb about it, and I kind of owe him something.—Of course I like to cross him in little things. You know that. But this is different.—Cobb, what do you say to the first of May?"

"Oh, Lord," he said. "Honey, can't you make it sooner? How about January first?"

"That's pretty soon. Only a few weeks."

"But why not?"

"Well—maybe."

She would make it no more definite and Cobb squeezed her hand and said, "We're going to have a wonderful life, you and me. If you can just get used to anybody as crude as me. But I'm going to take the rough spots off."

"I like the rough spots," Jan said.

Cobb left the Devant house with a sense of deep elation that demanded concrete action. His mind was busy with plans. He would buy the lot on Sycamore Street and he would build a house. He would push his drilling campaign, as soon as the loan was put through, and he would drill a hundred holes down into the earth. He would build his own refinery, one of these days . . .

But within a week, while the matter of the loan still was pending, the structure of the Lebanon anticline was abruptly narrowed by a dry hole, and for two days he saw Jan only briefly, although he remembered to call her every morning.

It was the outpost well of the Cobb Walters Oil Company, on the southeast slope, and salt water had been struck at forty-five hundred feet. Cobb was at the rig day and night as they made an electrical log of the well and then plugged back to 4,475 feet and attempted to complete from a streak of sand indicated at that level.

In the early morning Sandy Lake telephoned Cobb at the Lebanon House. "Bad news," he said. "You got a duster out here, Cobb."

Cobb sat shivering at the telephone with a blanket draped around his shoulders. "Yes, I was afraid of that."

"It means everything on the southeast slope is condemned, Cobb, and you've got some of that, haven't you?"

"Yes, about four hundred acres," Cobb said glumly. "Well, go ahead and plug that well."

This was the first important failure in the Lebanon field and it was discussed knowingly in the town by men and women who had never smelled crude oil until that year. Ardmore Devant spoke about it when Cobb went to the Lebanon National Bank that afternoon.

"Isn't this rather a blow to you, Cobb?" he asked.

"It condemns a few leases, but I've still got a spread of sixteen hundred acres on the structure." Cobb set his jaw stubbornly.

"But you supposed the other four hundred were on structure until this dry hole came along, didn't you?"

"Yes, as far as we could tell from surface geology." Cobb waved one hand lightly. "Well, we can't make an oil well every time, and there went twenty thousand dollars down the drain. Mr. Devant, I came to talk to you about that loan."

Ardmore put his fingertips together. "My proposition still stands. We're planning to have a geologist pass on the leases we'll require as collateral, and I think we'll ask for five hundred acres, Cobb."

"Five hundred? Say, close-in leases are bringing better than two thousand dollars an acre."

"Yes, I know, but we've got to have a certain dry hole insurance. Cobb, this bank doesn't want to go too deep into the oil business, and we don't intend to take any chances. This is still a country bank." Ardmore smiled.

"Okay, then," Cobb said. "You can hand-pick your leases."

"And as regards the other loan, Cobb, we'll require your block of stock in the company as collateral."

"You don't mean all of it, of course. How many shares are you asking?"

"I do mean all of it, Cobb."

"But that's my stock control," Cobb said. "No, sir."

"It can be arranged so that you can still vote the stock. But see here, Cobb, this loan is highly speculative, it seems to me, and we don't intend to take any chances, as I said. That dry hole changed the picture a good deal. It injected doubt into this situation, and if it should turn out to be just a streak of sand out there we want to be protected."

"That Trading Post producer on the west flank proves it's no shoestring sand," Cobb said.

"Possibly it does, Cobb, but those are our terms, and they're our final terms."

"Give me a little time, then," Cobb said.

Cobb called a meeting of the board of directors, and when there were objections he said angrily, "The trouble is this town is still thinking small-town. We're dealing in big money now. We're dealing in millions. Sure, they're asking a high rate of interest, but I don't know where we'd get the money any cheaper, and if we're ever in a hole we can always sell some leases, and you could go out today and get anyhow two thousand dollars an acre for our choice leases. You could raise two hundred thousand dollars on a quarter section, if you wanted to sell. But we don't want to sell any of our leases. No, sir, not a solitary lease. We're going to produce that oil ourselves."

The next day Cobb went to the Lebanon National Bank with Ralph Paige, as secretary-treasurer of the company, and they signed the notes. The money was to be repaid in quarterly installments and the first payments were due on the fifteenth of February. Ralph Paige frowned over provisions that in case of default on any one installment the principal amount of the loan became due and payable, and that in case of total default the collateral should be possessed by the bank. But Cobb laughed and said, "The fifteenth of February is a long way off. We'll have a dozen producing wells by the fifteenth of February and we'll be running enough oil to pay off a quarterly installment

with a few days' run. Damn it, Ralph, can't you see this thing is big?"

But Ralph shook his head, and when they left the bank he said, "It's too much haste, Cobb. We don't have to go about it this way. I tell you, it's a random kind of financing and I don't like it."

"You let me do the worrying," Cobb said. "I'm the president of this company and I own the stock control of this company."

"And you've just now pledged your stock control, Cobb."

"Sure, I pledged it. But I can still vote it. So that's that."

They paused on the corner. "Cobb," Ralph said quietly, "you're a smart man. This town owes you a lot. I've said that before, and I mean it. You showed a sort of genius in the way you went about this thing, and drilled that well and reconditioned the Nancy Hanks to ship the oil. You're an organizer."

"Well, thanks, Ralph." Cobb was pleased.

"But you're no financier," Ralph said. "If you don't look out your head will be bigger swelled than your bank account."

Cobb smiled. "My head is screwed on tight enough, Ralph. I told you what the question was. It's a question whether you're going to think big or whether you're going to think small-town. Ralph, I'm thinking big."

"Well, you've got a big head to think with," Ralph said.

Cobb shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and walked on. When he reached his office he found Nancy Jo Paige standing by the window. He went to meet her, with the guarded manner he invariably assumed with her. But she had come about business.

"Cobb, Clara told me you were looking for a secretary."

"That's a fact. The abstract company grabbed Judy Barstow. Do you know somebody wants the job?"

"Yes, *I* do."

"You?" Cobb raised his eyebrows.

"I can do the work," she said hurriedly. "I took a business course once and honestly, Cobb, I learned. I can type and my shorthand is pretty fair."

"Nancy Jo, you've got an oil well on your farm. Your father owns stock in this company and he's an officer of it. What do you want to go to work for?"

"To be busy, Cobb. Just to keep busy."

"You ought to get married. That's what you ought to do."

She shook her head. "Cobb, do I get the job?"

He looked at the alert poise of her body. There was an anxiety in her manner that surprised him, and he did not want to disappoint her. "You're hired," he said. "God help me."

She came to work the next morning. She was in the office when he arrived, and before the day was over it was plain that she was interested in the work. By that evening she could quote the price of tubing; she knew how to look up casing costs. She had learned that a supply dealer had opened a field office in Lebanon and was building a warehouse of sheet iron near the station, down by a siding where joints of casing were being racked.

Cobb worked hard in the next few weeks, and as the days passed the possibility of being married on the first of January was gone and then it was the first of February he talked about. Yes, said Jan, perhaps the first week in February. Cobb counted on it, and dreamed of it, and he talked about it when Jan drove with him to the oil field. As much as possible they liked to get away alone together, away from the chill restraint of the Devant house. The oil field was Cobb's puddle and he was a big frog in it. He was sure of himself, a properly dominant male, when they were together among the rigs.

On the slope north of Lebanon new derricks were ris-

ing and huge trucks climbed the grade with loads of casing and machine parts that had come in on the Lebanon & County Railroad. The receipts of the railroad were more than they had ever been in the days of cattle, corn and wheat. Tank cars full of Lebanon crude rolled away to Aldo Junction, and in the meantime the right of way for a pipeline had been acquired and a surveying crew was at work.

The Trading Post Oil Company had been active. Three crews of geophysicists were in the field, and red trucks with the familiar Tropoco trademark were seen on the back roads of Lebanon County. Men in khaki pants and boots combed the hills and plains of the county, walked among the boll pickers in the cotton fields, and set off small charges of dynamite on the hillsides to observe the speed with which the sound waves passed down through the shales and were reflected from the hard limestone formation that overlay the oil sand. The action of the waves was recorded on a seismograph, and from it the depth of the limestone beneath the surface was determined.

Then field surveys were begun and the structure of the key bed of limestone was calculated over a great area in the county. At one point, eight miles north of the Abernathy well, it was reported that an elevation of the limestone stratum had been found, an indicated anticline, and a test well was staked.

The week before Christmas a huge star was hoisted to the clock tower of the courthouse and strings of colored lights were run from the courthouse eaves to the building-line all around. There was a series of open-house parties that lasted through New Year's Day. Cobb went to these with Jan, and he was careful not to drink too much and to be correct in everything he did. At an eggnogg party at the Devant house Will Andrews joined him on the sun porch, where they received the warmth of the January sun through the glass.

"Cobb, I made an oil well," the big man said.

"Yes, I heard you were about to complete. What did she gauge?"

"We haven't drilled in yet, but we made a drill stem test and it looks good." He smiled. "You remember you said when I made a well to come and talk to you? Well, I've made my well, and my leases extend north to that test of Jesse Halliday's. He's just a few hundred feet from the pay and if he makes a well my leases are proved up."

"It would seem so," Cobb said. "But he ain't made a well yet, and now I got to offset yours."

"Exactly. Now if you and I could get together we could hold off those offsets to a certain extent. We could develop our holdings as a unit and we could bring in some of the smaller leases with us and maybe we could work out a unitization agreement for the whole field. If we just work together. What do you say?"

"Jesse Halliday still needs to make a well."

Will Andrews shrugged his shoulders. "Let it wait, then. But, Cobb, we're facing a serious situation. There's just too much oil these days. There was too much before this field came in, and there's a good deal of crude going to market over in East Texas, in the Joiner field.—I suppose you heard about the Christmas present they had out there? A big well, a really big well. Over twenty thousand barrels, and a good ten miles north of the discovery well. They say it's a series of shoestring sands out there, but if it should turn out to be one big structure, Cobb, it will be something."

Will Andrews had set Cobb thinking, and for several days he worked on a unitization plan of his own. If he could get every landowner in his spread to agree to take a proportionate interest in each well he could effect a large saving in drilling costs. He could eliminate expensive offsets and develop his holdings more gradually, in a pat-

tern. So he went to talk to the landowners and the royalty owners.

He pointed out that he could develop the field along scientific lines and recover the greatest amount of oil at the lowest cost, without wasteful dissipation of the reservoir energy. Everyone would benefit, he said, explaining that under such a plan each land or royalty owner would receive a percentage in the production of each well, based on his acreage. If he owned eighty acres he would have a five per cent interest in the royalty of each well in the sixteen-hundred-acre block. If he owned forty acres it would be two and one-half per cent.

But, the small landowner argued, if a four-thousand-barrel well comes in on my forty acres I'd get about three hundred dollars a day. It would take pretty near fifty wells to pay me that much under unitization and I'd have a long time to wait for it. And supposing it comes in a dry hole over yonder on Dick Smith's eighty acres. Would Dick get five per cent on each well just the same?

He would, if he had signed the unitization agreement.

And on my forty acres we bring in a big well and I get just two and one-half per cent and Dick gets five per cent? The hell with that. I ain't signing, Mr. Walters. No, sir.

So it went. A few landowners were willing to agree, but the majority was opposed. The majority wanted Cobb to drill that well, like the lease said, and pay up that one-eighth royalty, like the lease said. And they wanted those wells put down in a hurry, like the lease said, before the oil was drained out from under their land.

There was oil pouring out of a half dozen wells now, filling the tank cars on the siding at Devant. Some men would be rich and others, whose land lay in Cobb's block of leases, waited impatiently. They were resentful because no large bonus had come their way; they fretted because drilling had not begun on their land. It was rush, rush, rush. Get that oil up and sell it and pay me my one-eighth. I

want to get me a new car. I want to go to Dallas to live. I'm going to send my boy to Texas A. & M.

Those who had money spent it. Cars of merchandise rolled in on the tracks of the Lebanon & County Railroad. Lumber for new buildings; automobiles; bathroom fixtures; seed and sod; peacocks; clothes and hats and boots; dresses from New York City, ordered from magazines. Dolly Goback walked into the Red Front Emporium with a copy of a fashion magazine and pointed out a drawing of a dress and said, "Get me it." The picture went through with an order to a New York buyer, who obtained the dress from a wholesaler who had copied the design as soon as the trade issue was out, and the creation came back to Dolly Goback on the Nancy Hanks, among casing and drill stems and bull wheels and lumber for the rigs. And Dolly appeared at noon in a low-cut gown, in silk stockings and high-heeled shoes, and the drillers and the rough-necks gave her the eye as she waddled along the public square. Dolly was sure to catch a husband that year, and possibly it would be Joe Simmons, who worked in the North Garage and supported his parents, who had lost their farm to the Lebanon National Bank, for Joe often borrowed a cut-down Ford at the garage to take Dolly riding out to the Point.

And among the freight and merchandise on the Nancy Hanks came another item which added distinction to the Goback home. Mrs. Goback had ordered it from a catalogue and it was a set of dishes. There were a dozen plates, and soup bowls and gravy dishes and platters, and there were a dozen cups and a dozen saucers of the usual dimensions, and there was an extra dozen saucers, of somewhat smaller size, on which one might place one's cup while drinking from the other saucer, of regulation size.

Cobb Walters had the fever. The oil was pouring out of the ground, out of the porous rocks where it had accumulated through the ages. It was rushing into the gas traps,

into the lease tanks, into the gathering line, the tank cars, and the money was coming into the offices of the Cobb Walters Oil Company in amounts that made Nancy Jo Paige whistle.

Cobb was rich and there were things he wanted and he bought them. He bought another car and it was yellow, as was the first, and cost ten times as much. Now he believed that yellow was his lucky color. He bought the lot on Sycamore Street that Ralph Paige had suggested, and he bought a grand piano and Oriental rugs and had no place to put them because his house was not yet built. To buy these things he spent money that he had borrowed from the Lebanon National Bank. He spent part of the hundred thousand dollars he had borrowed and he told himself that the company soon would be paying dividends and he would make up the deficiency. And by the middle of January he had gone through twenty-five thousand dollars.

"I had a use for the money," he told Ralph Paige, and was annoyed because Ralph had asked about it. "I thought I'd just hold onto it until it was needed in the drilling program, and then I'll make it over to the company. You see, I'm building a house. . . ."

In the middle of January the trees were bare, except for clumps of mistletoe, and only the big liveoaks along the river and the mountain cedars on the hills were green. The bodark apples had fallen from the trees and lay in pithy heaps along the fence of the house on Persimmon Street. On Sycamore Street the weeds and grass were tangled in the lot Cobb had bought. He took Jan to see it, telling her that he was ready to spud in their house.

They tramped among the weeds and plotted the angles of the house. Jan suggested a white house, ranch-style, with blue-green blinds, but Cobb did not think that was sufficiently grand. He wanted a house of massive stone. He wanted terraces and flower gardens on a grand scale.

He told her rather timidly what he had in mind. "Once I was driving through the country southwest of here and I stopped in a restaurant and it was made of petrified wood. They had it mortared into the walls, and there were a couple of bungalows in the town built of it and they told me they had a regular business there, gathering petrified wood for building materials. Jan, I'd like to have a house built of that."

"Goodnight!" Jan laughed. "It's all right for fireplaces, if you have that sort of room. But a house? Oh, no."

"Well, I never saw it tried in a big house, and it seems to me it's kind of fitting. That wood was growing millions of years ago and it's like it was then, only now it's rock. That stuff is pretty near as old as the oil that's making us rich, and it seems to me it's kind of fitting."

"But, Cobb, don't you think you ought to think about expense?"

"Golly, no," Cobb said. "Why should I? There's plenty of money and I'm richer than I ever had a right to hope and it's mine to spend. Sure I'm like a kid with a new toy, but who has a better right?"

"Who, indeed?" Jan said, and smiled. "I love it, Cobb. I love to see you having so much fun. But, darling, really, you didn't need to give me a diamond bracelet for Christmas, and you and I don't need a mansion."

"Why not?"

She looked at the tall weeds in the lot. "All right. But listen, Cobb, you can have the outside of the house to do with what you please. But the inside is mine."

Cobb had another plan that he told her nothing of. Once near a highway he had seen a pretentious house which fronted on the road and in the lawn was some wonderful shrubbery shaped in unnatural designs. One shrub was a bird in flight; another was an elephant. He wanted shrubbery such as that and he had been surprised to find there were men who made it their business. There were topiarists.

He planned to send for one and to have shrubs and hedges pruned to artistic shapes. The shrubbery would show what he could not put in words, and maybe an oil derrick could be worked out of a box hedge.

"I can't begin to tell you what all this means to me," he said to Jan. "This house we're building, for us. I have to pinch myself to believe it." As they walked back to the car he held her arm and said, "Honey, can't you set a date yet? Can't you? Can't we make it definite for the first of February?"

And all at once she smiled and said, "All right, the first week in February. I'll tell Father."

It was only three weeks away, and Cobb could not fill his days with sufficient detail. The Walters-Joplin well came in for fifteen hundred barrels and he took a pint of whisky along with the news to the house on Persimmon Street. Clara was not there and he and Nora finished the bottle. Then the west offset to the Goback well was completed; a thousand barrels. There were lease tanks to be built, tubing to be run, oil to be loaded in tank cars at Devant, where another loading rack now had been completed.

Then there was the matter of clothes. Cobb went to a tailor in Dallas, and this time he was not self-conscious. He was no longer awed. He reflected that he could buy this store and all that was in it, and he very nearly did. For the wedding: a frock coat of black vicuña, black and gray striped pants, a gray double-breasted waistcoat, patent leather shoes with black kid tops, a high silk hat and a box to keep it in, gray gloves to match his waistcoat, pearl studs and stickpin. He bought tails, a dinner jacket; shoes and trees to hold them firm, expensive boots to wear in the oil field. He bought business suits of worsteds, cheviots, tweeds; shirts of striped madras, broadcloth, cambray; neckties; felt hats; riding breeches. He did not buy a derby hat.

"Jesus, Cobb," Ed Drum said when he saw them.

"Boy, I'm going to get married right," Cobb said. "Can you tie an ascot tie?"

"No."

"Neither can I."

Ed picked up the telephone. No, Sweetie didn't know. Ralph Paige had no idea. Pruitt Devant couldn't even tie a respectable bow. He telephoned the high school, and Miss Julia Winters, who taught English 7, said that she had learned to tie an ascot one year when she had taught in Dallas and the senior class had given a performance of "The Importance of Being Earnest." So Cobb's appearance was assured, and all the other details of the wedding had never been in doubt. Jan had turned the wedding over to a department store in Dallas which solved such problems for half the state of Texas.

When Cobb went down to the square with Ed it was dark and Cobb saw a light burning in the office of the oil company. They went up the stairs and found Nancy Jo Paige still at her desk. "Here, what's this?" Cobb asked. "You should have gone home long ago."

She stood up and rocked slightly back and forth, smiling at Cobb. "I like this work. I like details.—Cobb, they've lost the bailer out at the Peters well and they're fishing."

Cobb grinned at Ed. "She's quite a secretary, and I don't know as I'll want to give her up when the time comes.—Nancy Jo, have you had your supper?"

"No."

"Then come on."

They went to the Alamo Café, and after they had ordered Nancy Jo said, "If you people want something to drink, you can get it. You know Ned Barstow's old drug store, with the empty bottles and all that in the window? Well, they sell it there now, and you go in through a side entrance."

"How do you know that?" Ed asked.

"I've been there."

Ed frowned. "I wondered if you were going to admit it. I heard you were there the other night."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Nancy Jo said. She pressed her knee against Cobb's under the table and made a grimace for only him to see. Then she smiled. "If you ask the waiter he'll get you a quart."

"Good idea," Cobb said, and called the waiter over.

"Nancy Jo doesn't understand how this town is changing," Ed said severely. "It's getting rough. All sorts of thugs are coming in. It's not safe for her to be so free and easy and she ought to stay out of those places. What do you think, Cobb?"

"You tell Nancy Jo that and she'll be all on edge to see what's going on."

"And why not?" the girl said.

The waiter returned with a package wrapped in brown paper. Cobb opened it under the table; a fruit jar of corn whisky. He poured it in teacups, one for each of them, and Ed frowned when Nancy Jo picked up her cup.

"Another thing," he said. "I don't think you ought to go to Jack Vibart's place, Nancy Jo. You were there the other night with Pruitt Devant."

"Shut up," Cobb said. "Both of you. Ain't we celebrating?"

"Celebrating what?" Nancy Jo asked. Her face was flushed.

"Oh, we've got plenty to celebrate."

"That's right." She smiled. "We're celebrating the great Mr. Walters tonight. Ed, let's have a toast to the great Mr. Walters." The drinks were stiff, but Nancy Jo gulped hers down. Cobb saw the color mounting in her cheeks. "Ed, go get some cigarettes," she said.

"I have some here."

"No, that's not my brand. Go on, will you?"

Ed got ungraciously to his feet. Nancy Jo looked at

Cobb. "It's fun working for you. I like it. Really I do. But, Cobb, I wish you wouldn't treat me like a secretary, after business hours, anyway. Let's go somewhere and dance." Her voice sank as if she had run out of breath. "I want your arms around me once again."

Cobb blinked. "Stop it, Nancy Jo. You don't need to put on an act with me."

She laughed softly. "In a lot of ways, Cobb, you're as stuffy as Ed."

"But you don't fool me the way you fool him."

"The great Mr. Walters," she said. "The great analyst. The great oil man. The great student of women."

Ed returned then and flipped a package of cigarettes in front of Nancy Jo. Cobb reached for his teacup to refill it, and suddenly she snatched it and threw it on the floor, where it crashed in pieces.

"Hell, no, stranger, you can't drink out of the same cup twice. Not the great Cobb Walters.—Waiter!"

"Nancy Jo!" Ed whispered.

"Waiter, bring Mr. Walters another cup," the girl said.

Ed glanced fearfully around him, then said angrily to Nancy Jo, "You see who's over there, don't you? Nolan Jennings. He'll spread it all over town."

"Spread what? Why? What if he does?"

Cobb grinned. "Ed, I think you need another slug."

He filled the cups and Nancy Jo reached for hers. "Here's to the prominent oil man. Ed, pick up your cup. Here's to Mr. Walters and his bride."

"You're not getting under my skin," Cobb said, and drained his cup. "Don't think you're kidding me about that, because it's a fact. I *am* on my way to being a prominent oil man and before I'm through they'll know the Cobb Walters Oil Company from coast to coast."

"I hate to think about it," Nancy Jo said. "But I'm afraid it's true."

"You're damned right it is. Look at me.—Ed, look at me."

They both gazed at him, Nancy Jo with her lips parted and her eyes sparkling. "What do you see?" Cobb asked.

"A prominent oil man," said Nancy Jo. "The great Cobb Walters."

"No, you don't. You see a fellow with straw in his hair. You see a boy off the farm. That's all. I ain't kidding myself about that. I got fancy clothes, but I still wear 'em like they was overalls. I know that."

"Well, Cobb, you're still human after all," Nancy Jo said. "You're kind of cute, even if it is an act."

"Say, I know I'm a hick," Cobb said. "I'm just a rough-neck. But you wait. You watch. A couple of months ago I was bust and now I'm on my way to being a millionaire. I'm going to make me twenty million dollars. Of course I know I'm lucky, but it ain't all luck."

"No, you're smart, Cobb," Ed said. "I know that."

"And I just begun, Ed," Cobb said eagerly. "Listen, I'm going to build me a little plant there on top of the hill and skim my oil. Just a topping plant to begin with and I'll have a few filling stations to sell the gasoline. Just small ones. Just to get started in the distribution game. But when the time comes, when I can swing it, I'm going to have bubble towers and a cracking plant and I'll make the best damned gasoline you can buy. I'm going to make it so it will jump like a bronco and I'm going to build filling stations like a whore's dream and it will be Cobbco gas, the best there is."

"The hell of it is, you may do it," Ed said. "Let's have a drink to Cobbco gas."

A thin man wearing boots and a mackinaw entered the café, laughing and talking in a loud voice. He joined a group of men at the cigar counter and the cashier leaned across to speak to him.

"I wonder what's up?" Cobb said.

"Just drunks," said Nancy Jo. "Just drunks like us."

But Cobb had heard a phrase of what the thin man said. He stood up and called, "What's the news?"

The man grinned. "A big well. A really *big* well. Ten thousand barrels or more and she's wild as the Mary Sudik. She . . ."

"Where is that?"

"About eight miles north of your discovery well, Mr. Walters, over toward Aldo Junction."

"Eight miles!"

"That's right. They say it's another structure."

Cobb looked down at Ed. "It must be that Trading Post test out there. Damn it, I got to get busy."

"But it doesn't affect you, Cobb."

"The hell it don't. I got to get in on it. Nancy Jo, is that oil map in the office? Where will I find it?"

"It's in the file." She stood up. "I'll get it for you." She said to Ed Drum, "Pay the check, honeybunch. I'm going with Cobb."

"Come on, then," Cobb said. "We got to hurry."

Nancy Jo went to the office for the map, and met Cobb at his car. He took the road north, and already there were cars ahead of them. There was a film of dust over the white highway and the headlamps could not pierce it. He was forced to drive slowly.

"It's going to take some dough," Cobb murmured, "but I got plenty. I'm going to have to dip into that hundred grand a little more. By God, a fool is his own guardian. I had a hunch about that money. I had a hunch I could use it."

Ahead of them the night sky was a pinkish, pulsing color, and as they reached the top of the slope they saw the gas flares that had caused it, and around them the towered lights of the drilling rigs. They drove on into darkness.

"Cobb, want a drink?" Nancy Jo asked. "I brought the fruit jar along."

"Well, pass it over."

Cobb swallowed some of the warm liquor, managing to keep his eyes on the road. "Nancy Jo, you're the perfect secretary, all right."

They came up out of the river bottoms and ahead of them there were lights, only a few hundred yards from the road. The big well was flowing wild and they saw the cloud of wind-blown oil and they heard the noise of it. Cobb blew out his breath. "Nancy Jo, there's an oil well." He turned through an open gate and a boy in overalls stepped into the glare of the headlamps and held up his hand. "Two bits parking, Mister."

Cobb gave him a quarter and found a place among many cars parked in the field. A man in the next car leaned out. "That's some well, Mr. Walters."

"Ain't it?" Cobb peered through the darkness. "Who are you?"

"Bob Elders."

"Oh, sure.—Say, don't tell me this is your land?"

"No. Belongs to Teddy Randall. I'm a quarter mile south."

"Signed a lease, I expect."

"Sure have. With the Trading Post Oil Company."

Cobb turned his eyes back to the plume of oil, black against the night sky. After a moment he leaned out of the car. "Say, Bob, know of anybody the Trading Post missed up on?"

"Well, yes, there's old Phil Hines. Lives over yonder on the side of the ridge. He wouldn't sign a lease. Said he wouldn't deal with no big corperation."

"How much land has the old man got?"

"I believe it's eighty acres."

Cobb started the engine. "Thanks, Bob." He backed out to the road, where he stopped and opened the oil map on

his knees. As he looked up the Phil Hines farm Nancy Jo said, "Gee, this is exciting. I like this, Cobb."

They exchanged smiles, and she leaned back, the fruit jar cradled in her arms. Cobb followed an old rural delivery route where the sand was deep and the car skidded around sharp turns. They approached a farmhouse and Cobb turned the car so that the headlights fell on the mailbox. The name was Hines.

There was a light burning in a window; Cobb rapped on the door. The lamplight was behind Phil Hines when he opened the door, and wisps of gray hair haloed his head.

"Mr. Hines, I'm Cobb Walters. Tom Walters' son."

"Oh, sure. How is old Tom? Come in, boy."

They went into the house, and Cobb warmed his hands at the log fire. He heard the subdued sound of women's voices in the next room. "I hear the Trading Post Oil Company has been around here, leasing land," Cobb said.

"They sure have."

Cobb saw the fruit jar in Nancy Jo's hands and took it from her. "I brought along some mighty fine corn, Mr. Hines."

He held out the jar, and the old man took it, drank, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and showed his brown teeth in a grin. "You're here about leasing my land, too," he said. "You don't need to beat around the bush." He tilted the fruit jar again, then squinted at Cobb and grinned. "But passing me whisky won't make no difference. I'm pleased to make you welcome, because you're old Tom's boy, but passing me whisky ain't going to change me none."

"Let's just forget it, then," Cobb said. "Let's just be sociable. I heard tell there was a flaw in your title, anyhow."

"A flaw in my title?" The old man bristled. "There is not. I got my abstracts and my tax receipts from the day the first plow broke this here sod. I got them papers yon-

ler in my trunk. Where did you hear there was a cloud on my title?"

"Somebody told me. I don't remember. Forget it."

"It's a fact it ain't recorded with the county clerk, but my title is clear. You set here a minute." Phil Hines tamped out of the room and Cobb smiled at Nancy Jo. They heard him moving about in the next room, speaking impatiently to his wife, slamming back the lid of a trunk. He returned with a sheaf of dusty papers and tossed them on the table. "Let's see you find a flaw in that title."

"If you say so, I'm satisfied," Cobb said. "And if you don't want to sign a lease, what difference does it make?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't sign. And I didn't tell that corporation that. All I said was I'd sign a lease after they'd made a well."

"After they'd made a well?" Cobb said.

"Why, shore. If they think enough of it to spend all that money to drill a hole, I think enough of it to wait and see what happens and get plenty of cash for my lease."

Cobb eyed the old man. "You heard about that well, didn't you?"

"Heard what?"

"Well, they're down pretty near five thousand feet."

"Is that so?"

"My wells over at Lebanon hit the oil sand at just a little over four thousand feet," Cobb said.

Phil Hines grunted. "If that's anything agin it, why are you after leasing my land?"

"I didn't say I was."

"That's so, you didn't." Phil Hines considered, then reached again for the fruit jar.

"But I'm not saying I ain't interested," Cobb said. "I came out here to make an offer, if the title was all right.—Nancy Jo, I guess we better get started. It's pretty late."

"See here," the farmer said. "What was the offer you had in mind?"

"I thought about twenty dollars an acre, depending on your title, of course."

"Now, dang it, you can see that title is clear."

Cobb looked at the papers on the table, hesitated, and nodded. "I don't doubt your title is all right."

"Then, dang it, you'd ought to offer more than twenty dollars an acre. If you said three hundred maybe I'd sign up."

"Three hundred?" Cobb said. "Hell, no."

Phil Hines cocked his head on one side. "Well, come again."

"Fifty," Cobb said.

The farmer shook his head, and Cobb reached for the fruit jar. "One fifty," Phil Hines said.

Cobb took a drink. "I don't want to bargain. I'll say one hundred bucks an acre, and that's the best I can do. If you're interested, say so, and if you ain't, we got to be on our way."

Phil Hines pursed his lips and looked at Cobb.

"If you're interested get your hat and your wife and we'll go to town right now. If you ain't, we'll just forget it."

"What do you want to go to town for?"

"To get a notary."

"Oh, I see."

"Well, what do you say?"

"I believe I'll say yes."

"Then get your hat. Nancy Jo, get his hat off that hook. And say, we got to have your wife's signature, too. Here's your hat, Mr. Hines."

Phil Hines turned his head and called, "Hey, Emma."

Mrs. Hines came out at once. She was wearing her coat and a sunbonnet.

On the way to town Nancy Jo sat in back with Mrs. Hines, and the old farmer was beside Cobb with the fruit jar cradled between his knees. Cobb followed the sandy

road, which circled back to Lebanon, and avoided the highway that passed by the Trading Post well. When they reached Lebanon he stopped the car in front of the Lebanon House and went for the night clerk, who was a notary public. Phil Hines and his wife signed their names on the lease forms, Nancy Jo signed as a witness, the notary affixed his seal, and Cobb wrote a check for eight thousand dollars.

On the way back to the Hines farm the old man dozed, and Nancy Jo and Mrs. Hines chatted in the back seat. They had nearly reached the farmhouse when a sudden bright light flashed on the horizon, a sheet of sharp light that spread high and threw in relief the ruts of the road and the bare trees along it. Phil Hines opened his eyes and sat up, and Mrs. Hines cried, "My land, it's afire!"

"It's a fire, all right," Cobb said. "Wonder what it is."

"It must be that there well," Phil Hines said. "Yep, I guess it's that well a-burnin'."

"That's where Teddy Randall's farm is," Mrs. Hines said. "Right there north of that bare hill."

Cobb stopped the car by the Hines mailbox and stared at the old farmer. "What well are you talking about?"

Phil Hines chuckled. "Did you have the idea we didn't know about that big well?" He got out of the car, and they saw his saturnine smile as he opened the door for his wife. "I might as well tell you, sonny, the best offer I could git off that corperation was five dollars an acre, and they didn't seem to care whether I said yes or no."

They watched him walk toward the house beside his wife, and for a long time Cobb could not speak. Nancy Jo got in front with him and touched his hand lightly. "Why don't you take a drink?"

"That old devil out-slicked me," Cobb said. "Can you imagine that? Eight thousand dollars. I just threw it down the drain."

"Better take a drink, Cobb."

He took the jar. "Listen, you!"

"Yes?"

"Don't you breathe a word of this. Don't you dare. Don't you ever let it get out."

She was laughing. "Oh, but it's too good. It's just too good."

Cobb flushed, then took a deep drink. "It's plain enough this land is off structure. Well, I'm stuck. But listen here, Nancy Jo, you're my secretary and this is a business secret. You hear?"

They returned to Lebanon on the back road. Cobb did not even want to see the burning well. Nancy Jo slipped her hand under his arm. "All right, I'll keep it a secret."

"You sure better."

"Now wait. As a favor to you I'll keep it a secret." Her smile was teasing. "But you have to do me a favor, too."

"What's that?"

"Take me somewhere. Take me dancing or something."

"What for? Just to torment Ed?"

"No. Of course not."

"Nancy Jo, when are you two going to take the step?"

"We aren't."

"How's that? Because of Sweetie?"

"No. Because of me."

Cobb grunted and drove on. When they reached the top of the slope above Lebanon he stopped the car and she handed him the fruit jar. She touched his hand, and said in a whisper, "Cobb, when you get tired of Jan Devant, come around."

"Is that a nice thing to say, the week before I'm married?"

"You're not married yet." She laughed. "Cobb, you're such an easy mark. You're fun."

He looked down at the taunting curve of her lips, her drooping eyelids, and suddenly he put the fruit jar on the floor and caught her shoulders. He kissed her, and she

squirmed nearer him. He held her tightly and kissed her with almost angry domination, but he was the first to draw away.

"Come on," he said roughly. "Let's go to town."

He drove on to the public square, and as he turned by the courthouse Nancy Jo asked, "Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you home."

She sighed. "How they're going to love it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Surely you haven't forgotten that check for eight thousand dollars?"

"Now listen here. I'm not joking. You keep quiet about that."

"I made a deal. Remember? I said I'd keep quiet if you'd take me somewhere tonight."

Cobb smiled. "All right. Where do you want to go?"

There was an instant's pause. "Let's go up to your rooms."

Cobb stopped the car and looked at her in the light of a street lamp. Her lips were parted and her eyes were so dark that he could not see into them. He heard his own breathing. Her knee touched his, insistently, but she did not speak.

Cobb turned the car around. He drove to the Lebanon House, to the side street behind it where the trees were thick dark shadows and where there was a side door that led to a side stairs that led to the second floor where Cobb's rooms were.

21

COBB slept late, and as he was shaving the next morning he scowled at his reflection in the mirror. He cut himself, and swore, and then he thought, hell, what difference does it make? Nobody will ever know and things like that you just can't help. I won't change overnight.

Nancy Jo was at her desk when he went up the stairs to the office of the Cobb Walters Oil Company. She glanced up and smiled when he entered, but all she said was, "Cobb, there are some letters you ought to answer, and the supply company wants a check."

"Thanks," Cobb said, and he was grateful. As he sat at his desk he looked at her occasionally. She was busily at work, a competent, efficient secretary. It was hard to believe that he had driven her to within a block of her house on the knoll at four o'clock that morning, and that they had crept along the driveway to the side door. When she kissed him goodnight she had whispered, "Don't feel like a villain, Cobb. It's all right. I planned it and you didn't have a thing to say about it."

He remembered her low, tremulous laughter.

Now, looking at her, he no longer thought of Nancy Jo as a young and rather irresponsible girl. He knew that she was wiser and more sure of herself than he would ever be.

She approached his desk. "There's another thing, Cobb. You got a notice from the Railroad Commission. Did you see it?"

"The Railroad Commission?" Cobb frowned. "About the Nancy Hanks? What's wrong?"

"It's not the Nancy Hanks, Cobb. It's from the oil and gas division and it's about the Lebanon field. A notice to show cause why proration rules should not be enforced here."

"Good God, where is it?" Cobb fumbled among the papers on his desk.

She found the notice for him. It recounted that the Lebanon field had been included in the order of the Commission of November 25 which set the state-wide production allowable at 680,238 barrels. Since the production in Lebanon County was nominal at that time no proration rules had been promulgated, the notice said, but in view of complaints that oil was being produced wastefully a hearing to show cause why rules should not be established and enforced had been called.

"Cobb, is it anything serious?" Nancy Jo asked.

"I'll say it is. You've got a three-thousand-barrel well on your place. How would you like to be forced to hold it down to only a couple of hundred barrels a day? How would you like that?"

"Is that what proration is?"

"That's just what it is."

"But why?"

"They say it's to prevent waste, but it's got nothing to do with waste whatsoever. That's just a slogan. It's to protect the price, that's all it is." Cobb reached for his hat. "I may not be back this evening. You close the place up."

"Where are you going, Cobb?"

"To see Ed Drum."

"Oh . . . Ed." She moved one hand slightly. "What can Ed do?"

Cobb smiled. "Well, he runs a newspaper."

"You mean his mother does."

"That's right. Well, I'll talk to Sweetie, too."

Cobb went downstairs and pushed his way impatiently along the crowded sidewalk to the *Lebanon News*. Amelia Drum raised her eyebrows high in her pale, placid face when he burst into the office.

"Cobb, what's got into you?"

She was pecking out on a typewriter one of the breathless items about a garden party, with the usual emphasis on refreshments, which invariably were "delectables" in the *Lebanon News*. Ed came forward, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. They were having trouble with the press again.

"I want to talk to you two," Cobb said. "Look here. Look at this."

"Well?" asked Mrs. Drum. "What is it?"

"It's a notice from the Railroad Commission. They want to prorate the Lebanon field."

"Heavens," Mrs. Drum said. "Don't talk to me about that. Talk to Eddie."

Ed Drum smiled and took the notice. He read every word of it, then looked up at Cobb. "What's the meaning of it?"

Cobb sat down. "It means they'll cut us to a few thousand barrels' production. It means all these farmers who have been coming in and paying off frozen credits and making business hum in Lebanon will have to wait years to get any money. It means they'll cut the production of each well to just a hundred barrels or so."

"Oh, yes," Ed said.

"Look here, Ed, they didn't do this to other fields. Yes, there was proration at Yates, but they have those tremendous big wells there. They have more oil than the pipelines can handle, so they had to prorate. But we aren't producing more than our outlet, or we won't be when the pipeline ties on. Far from it. So why should we be restricted? Why should we have to suffer? You and I

know that proration is just a dream, just an idealistic dream, and I'll be damned if they're going to use Lebanon to experiment with." He got to his feet. "Get the picture, Ed. We're in a depression. People have been forced off their land. They were starving, pretty near. And then I strike oil. Everybody's in a way to make lots of money, but they want to come along and take that away from us. It's not fair. It's not right. Don't you see?"

"Maybe so," Ed said. "But I don't know what there is to do about it."

"I'm going to fight it. Look here, I'm going to call a mass meeting. We're going to organize, Ed, and we're going to fight."

Ed glanced at his mother.

"Are you going to represent the people of this county, or ain't you?" Cobb asked. "That's the question. Your newspaper can carry a lot of weight, Ed, if you get in there with a good, strong editorial and if you put yourself behind this mass meeting."

Mrs. Drum pursed her small mouth. "Cobb, it sounds controversial to me."

"Controversial!" Cobb said. "You're darned right it is."

"Well, you know we try to avoid anything controversial."

Cobb groaned. "But, Mrs. Drum, it's not a local controversy. I mean Lebanon County ain't divided on it. They're all against proration. Every one of them."

"Is that so, Cobb? How do you know that?"

"Well, see what would happen to them. They could only produce their wells at a small fraction of the potential. Do you think any man in his right mind is going to support that?"

Mrs. Drum shook her head. "Cobb, we're just a country newspaper. We don't crusade."

"Crusade!" Cobb almost shouted. "Look here, Mrs.

Drum, you've been running this newspaper long enough to know what side your bread is buttered on."

"Now please don't threaten."

Cobb subsided into his chair and stared at the fat woman perched monumentally on her stool. He drew a deep breath and said, "All right, you ask Ralph Paige and see how he feels about it. You see how the Chamber of Commerce and the businessmen feel about it. You ask your advertisers. I'll tell you. The oil men are against it, the tool supply houses are against it, the landowners are against it, the royalty owners are against it, the pipeline companies and the refineries are against it, the local businessmen are against it."

"Then what's all the fuss about if nobody's for it?"

"Oh, some people are for it," Cobb said. "Men operating stripper wells in other fields are for it. Oil men in other fields are for it. The Trading Post Oil Company has big production interests in other fields, so it would just as soon see Lebanon prorated."

"Oh, this is all too much for me," Mrs. Drum said. "And it's controversial, too. Ed, what do you think?"

"I think we'd better wait and see what happens at the mass meeting. When is it going to be, Cobb?"

"As soon as possible. Say on Monday."

"Monday. Isn't that the day before your wedding?"

Cobb frowned and nodded. "That's right. But I don't see how we could have it any sooner.—Ed, you're going to print a story on this, aren't you?"

Ed glanced at his mother. "Yes, I guess so."

"I'll leave this notice with you, and you can say the mass meeting will be held Monday night on the courthouse steps."

"Okay. But, Cobb, I don't believe we'll run an editorial."

Cobb nodded, managed a smile for Mrs. Drum, and walked out. He went next to the office of the Chamber of Commerce and talked to Ralph Paige. Why, sure, he'd help

arrange the mass meeting, Ralph said. Why, it was an outrage. Everybody in town would oppose proration.

"Maybe you'll preside at the meeting, Ralph?"

"If you want me to. Sure I will."

Cobb borrowed pencil and paper and prepared an advertisement for insertion in the daily and weekly issues of the *Lebanon News* and gave it to the bootblack in the barber shop to deliver to Ed Drum.

Then he went to see Jan. She was having a bridge party, and when Cobb went up to the porch he saw the tables inside, heard the high monotonous sound of many female voices. He asked the maid to tell Jan to meet him in the garden, and he waited in an arbor beneath a bare grapevine. She came to him, smiling. "Fortunately I'm dummy, Cobb, but I only have a minute. Why didn't you come on in?"

"Oh, Lord, no!"

"You'll have to some time. You'll have to meet 'em all." She smiled teasingly. "Everybody's curious about you, you know. You've made quite a mark in this town."

Cobb frowned. "Sit down a minute, Jan."

Her eyes opened wider, and she started to speak.

"This is important," Cobb said.

She sat on the edge of a swing and he dropped down beside her. "Jan, things aren't going so good. They're trying to prorate the Lebanon field, and we've got to make a fight. I got a notice from the Railroad Commission this morning."

"Is that so serious, Cobb?"

"Yes, it is. I want you to understand this. Proration would just about put me out of business. It really would. It would cut our production to about ten per cent, and we've got heavy drilling costs, we've got our payroll. And we've got to pay out a tremendous big loan."

"Oh, I see," Jan said.

Cobb did not meet her eyes. "If we're prorated, if we're

restricted to a couple of hundred barrels on each well, and maybe even less, we just couldn't make it go. We'd be out of business."

"That doesn't seem fair."

"It ain't. Proration is in favor of the big companies. It ain't in favor of us. We've just *got* to fight it, Jan, and I've laid plans for a mass meeting on Monday."

"But, Cobb, we're to be married Tuesday."

"Yes, and there's a hearing in Austin, before the Railroad Commission only a couple of weeks later. Jan, I've got to get busy and organize the opposition to appear at that meeting. You see that, don't you?"

"Well, golly," Jan said. "This *is* bad news."

"It sure is. I hope we can make those people listen to reason."

"Golly, it will make it kind of complicated," Jan said.

"I don't want our honeymoon prorated, too."

Cobb looked at her, saw her smiling lips and the flutter of her eyelashes. He took her hands, and they seemed cold in his. "We'll just have to go away later, honey. I don't see anything else to do."

"Oh, hell," Jan said. She pushed a pebble with the toe of her shoe.

"Maybe we ought to put it off," Cobb suggested. "Maybe we'd better set it back a few weeks. What do you think?"

"The wedding, Cobb?" Her eyes widened and the corners of her lips were pinched in.

"A couple of weeks ought to do it. Three weeks at the most. Jan, I can't get away from Lebanon now. There's just too much to do."

She stood up. "If that's the way it has to be." Her voice had a crisp note.

Cobb looked at her face and jumped to his feet. "Now say, now look here, Jan. Forget I said that. No, sir, I'm afraid to do that. I can't hardly believe it as it is, and I'm

scared to put it off. No, sir, we'll get married Tuesday and we'll go away later."

Color had returned to Jan's cheeks and her fingers pressed his. "Darling, you're right. I'm sorry if I was selfish about it. We'll be married later, when everything is worked out. It will only be a little while, won't it?"

"Yes, I guess so, but . . ."

"And then we'll have everything to ourselves." She shrugged. "And besides, it will make Father happy."

Cobb stared glumly across the lawn at the house. Her manner had changed and he did not understand. She seemed more sure of herself and correspondingly more remote from him. "You know, our house will be finished if we wait," she was saying. "We'll have our furniture and all that."

"Yes," Cobb said. "Say, I ordered the material."

"Do you really have your heart set on a house of petrified wood?"

"I sure do. Don't you like it?"

"It will be rather on the massive side, don't you think? For the house we want."

"I want the best house we can build," Cobb said.

"I tell you what, Cobb." Jan smiled. "Let's make it the first week in June, and everything will be ready."

"June!" Cobb stared at her. "Jan, damn it, that's four months off."

"I know, but in June the house will be ready."

"Now wait up. I don't see why we can't be married in about three weeks. Soon as this thing is taken care of. Three weeks ought to do it, Jan."

She shook her head slightly, and to Cobb it seemed that there was a certain relief in her manner. She said, "Let's not discuss it now, Cobb. I'm chilled through. But anyhow, I'll tell Father that we've put it off." She lightly kissed his cheek. "I must run."

Left alone, Cobb scowled and walked back to his car.

This was not the way he had wanted it and he wondered why he had been unable to assert himself more firmly. Was it because of last night? Oh, hell, he thought, everything happens at once. He went to his car and took the road to the oil fields, where traffic was slowed to mule speed.

From the hillside where the derrick of the Abernathy well stood Cobb could count thirty drilling wells and there had been more than a dozen completions. But many of the wells in the Lebanon field were shut down to await the arrival of the pipeline, which was building south from Aldo Junction at the rate of two miles a day. From the slope where an offset to the Joplin well was being drilled Cobb could see the pipeline workers. Beside a ditch three feet deep the completed section of the line lay curving in the prairie grass. Early in the morning, before dawn, when the metal was contracted by the chill, the pipe would be stuffed into the hole and covered over with dirt by a bulldozer. That giant pipe, Cobb thought, was far removed from the days of the Pennsylvania boom when oil teamsters had torn from the ground the four miles of pipe of the first pipeline from Pithole to the railroad.

But the pipeline recalled the notice from the Railroad Commission, and Cobb frowned and returned to his car. When he reached the road he saw Will Andrews walking with huge strides toward town. Cobb stopped to pick him up.

"Had a flat back there and no air in my spare," Will said. "Cobb, will you run me over to Devant?"

"Sure thing."

"I've been out to that Trading Post well," Will said, getting in the car. "You know, that steel derrick melted to soup and you could feel the heat way down the road. But they put it out. They snuffed it out with dynamite just a little while ago."

Cobb turned off on a section-line road that led to Devant. They passed beside a cotton field where there was un-

picked cotton stained and shrunken in the dry, hard bolls. Will Andrews chuckled and said, "That fellow should have harvested his cotton. That's Jesse Halliday's lease and he's not going to make an oiler."

"Ain't he?"

"He's down better than forty-seven hundred feet and the core showed only thin streaks of sand. The nearest well hit the pay at forty-four hundred." Will smiled. "You know, there's nothing like a dry hole to make a farmer of a man. I've noticed that an oil field is conducive to husbandry. You see some mighty fine crops around the margins of an oil field, Cobb. When a man has a dry hole he has to get out his plow and keep his eyes on the furrow."

They reached the graded highway that led to Lebanon by way of Devant. Will Andrews glanced at Cobb. "I suppose you got a notice from the Railroad Commission today?"

Cobb nodded. "Yes, but I'm not worried. They'll never make proration stick here."

"That's what they said in the Panhandle. That's what they said down at Darst Creek."

"Well, proration broke down at Darst Creek, didn't it?"

"It did for a while. The trouble is that one greedy operator can throw a monkey wrench. An oil field is as wasteful as its greediest operator, and there are plenty of greedy operators. There are plenty of men who don't give a damn for anything but the oil they take up. Look at this field, Cobb. I tell you, there's going to be a serious accident one of these days. They're building some rigs of green timber and that stuff shrinks and the bolts will loosen and pull out and a girt will fall down and smack somebody on the head one of these days. There ought to be a law against using green lumber."

"Sometimes it's the best you can get," Cobb said. His rig on the Jay Paul lease was of unseasoned pine.

"They can pay a little more and use steel," Will said

angrily. "It turns me sick. Men never learn. Not in the oil business. Every time you bring in a new field it's the same thing all over again. Reckless, greedy people. Wasting oil, wasting gas, wasting human lives. It turns me sick."

"I'm lining people up to fight proration," Cobb said. "But I reckon I'd be wasting my breath on you."

"I am not an opponent of proration," Will said shortly.

They reached Devant, and Cobb turned off on the dusty white road that led to the old feedhouse and platform, and at once he saw that there were men at work in the dust of Devant, where the ground was bare and treeless. Men were driving stakes, tacking up cloth pennants.

"You can let me off here," Will Andrews said, and Cobb stopped the car beside a small shack. Painted on a board nailed above the door were the words *Devant Townsite Company*. Inside Cobb saw a table and a file case and a young man bending over a blueprint. He saw Clara come to the door, with a careless wave of greeting.

"What's all this?" Cobb asked.

"Didn't you see my ad in the paper?"

"No."

"Well, there was an ad in the city papers." Will got out of the car. "Clara, do you have that newspaper with you?"

"Yes." She came forward. "Hello, Cobb."

"Cobb missed that ad," Will said.

Cobb took the newspaper, which was opened to an inside page, and read the advertisement: *Come to Devant for Opportunity. In the heart of the new Lebanon oil fields, and the principal shipping point, Devant is destined to be the production capital of the fields. Town lot sale on Monday. Free barbecue. Come early.*

"What do you know?" Cobb said. "Who put that in the paper? You, Andrews?"

"Yes. I bought the surface rights to a couple of hundred

acres of land off Ardmore Devant. I'm having it staked out and the first thing you know Lebanon will have a rival. You see, I figure this is a pretty good location. It's between your field and that new structure the Trading Post turned up, and it's a lot more convenient to both fields than either Lebanon or Aldo Junction."

Cobb nodded. "You don't miss up on anything. I've got to admit that. Well, maybe I'll come out for some free barbecue."

The big man smiled. "Do so by all means."

"Except Monday is the day we're having a mass meeting against proration on the courthouse steps. You'll see *my* ad in tomorrow's paper."

"So you're having a mass meeting?" Will pushed his hat back on his head and raised one foot to the running-board. "Son, I wonder whether you've given any thought to the broader aspects of proration. In that newspaper to-day there's the prognosis of a geologist, based on porosity and the thickness of the oil sand, that we may recover a half billion barrels of oil in Lebanon County if the new structure discovered by the Trading Post Oil Company proves up big. You saw that, I suppose?"

"No, I didn't see a paper today."

"Well, the way things are, I'd be surprised if we recover twenty per cent of the recoverable oil." Will looked steadily at Cobb. "We're wasting millions of cubic feet of gas every day, gas that people are paying an average of sixty-two cents a thousand feet for elsewhere. We're decreasing the reservoir pressure and the first thing you know this field will be on the pump. It's a scandalous situation, and in my opinion, Cobb, the only way we'll save our skins is through proration."

"There's too many slogans like waste and overproduction," Cobb said. "We got to be realistic here."

Will Andrews shook his head. "Some day we're going to have laws to prevent the lowering of bottom-hole pres-

sure in a wasteful manner, Cobb." He slapped his right fist in the palm of his left hand. "Some day we'll have pro-rata with teeth in it. But as it stands now the waste is a sin and a shame. And it's always been so, in every oil field I ever saw. I tell you, there'll be no monuments erected to the oil men of this generation."

"I ain't looking for a monument," Cobb said. "I'm just minding my business. That's all I want on my tombstone—he minded his business. That's monument enough for me."

Will Andrews smiled. "Well, I'll see you on Monday."

"Yes, I'll come out for some barbecue."

"I mean I'll be at your mass meeting, Cobb," Will Andrews said.

22

THE thistles on the hillsides were purple, the tall grass was tipped with orange, and a yaupon thicket on the ridge had lost its leaves but the berries were bright and red and not yet stripped by birds. The hills where there were no oil derricks were serene and warm-colored in the winter day, but along beside the railroad tracks the stakes had been trampled and the streets and alleys had lost their definition, so that there was no sense of order in the boom town of Devant, which as yet had not a single building.

On Sunday night a norther had come down from the Rocky Mountains, sweeping across the map of Texas that tilts like a soup plate down to the Gulf of Mexico. The temperature had dropped thirty degrees overnight and the air that day was clear and cold. There was a fire burning near the feedhouse when Cobb arrived, and he smelled the pungent cedar smoke. The auctioneer stood on the platform of the feedhouse, with his arms extended, and as Cobb crossed the tracks a lot was being auctioned.

It was the corner lot at Ranger and El Dorado Streets, and stakes in the prairie weeds marked the intersection. All the streets had been named after oil towns. There was Ranger, Desdemona, Seminole, Bowlegs, Hogshooter, Cushing—boom fields and boom towns of the past were remembered in the street names of Devant.

Near the loading rack, in the shadow of tank cars, Clara and Will Andrews sat at a table, facing the feedhouse. A few yards away cedar logs burned in a fire. Cobb came up behind them and said, "Say, you got a crowd."

Will Andrews smiled. "How about you? Can I interest you in a town lot?"

"No, thanks."

"Be a fine place to build your house, Cobb," Clara said.

"I have a lot, thanks." Cobb frowned.

She looked at his face, then got to her feet. She touched his arm and drew him aside, near the great bulk of a tank car. "Cobb, I heard about it this morning, and, well, I . . ."

"You heard what?"

"About you and Jan."

"What the hell," Cobb said. "What are you talking about? What did you hear?"

"I'm sorry." She turned her head away. "I shouldn't have said anything."

Cobb grinned. "So that's what they're saying. Listen, our marriage is postponed, that's all."

"Oh."

He laughed. "Christ, what a town!"

She smiled and returned to the table, and Cobb stood a moment by the tank car, frowning. He took out a cigarette and lit a match with an angry sweep on the bulging side of the car.

At the corner of Hogshooter and Ranger, two blocks from the station, a corner lot. The auctioneer's voice was crisp. Two hundred dollars bid. Do I hear three hundred? Do I hear two hundred and fifty? Sold for two hundred dollars to the gentleman with the lion's head scarfpin. The gentleman was Jesse Halliday. He came up to the table and put two hundred-dollar bills in front of Will Andrews. He glanced at Cobb, then lowered his eyes.

"What do you want with a town lot, Jesse?" Will asked. "You can't drill a well on it, you know."

"Yes, I know. Me and a friend of mine are going to start a business enterprise, Andrews."

"Jesse, they tell me you had a dry hole over there."

"That's right."

"Too bad."

"Too bad?" Halliday's eyes burned. "Listen here, from where I stand I can count thirty drilling wells. Thirty wells! And most of 'em on land I had under lease. Land I was robbed of!" His voice broke off.

"Robbed of?" Cobb said, squinting angrily in the sunlight. "Listen, don't you go around with that sort of talk."

Halliday looked at Cobb, shrugged his lumpy shoulders, and picked up his title papers.

"Oh, Cobb." Clara laughed. "He just wanted to get a rise out of you."

"Well, he got it."

"Oh, relax."

On Hogshooter near Ranger, four blocks from the station, a corner lot. A hundred dollars bid. Gentlemen, *gentlemen*, this here is a corner lot. A corner lot on the main street, a corner lot on the high road to the oil fields. The high road to riches. Gentlemen, a *hundred* dollars? I'll accept a bid of two hundred and fifty. A hundred and twenty-five bid, a hundred and fifty. Sold for a hundred and fifty to the—to the lady over yonder.

She paid Will Andrews the full amount in cash and gave her name as Ruby Dwyer. She was a full-blown blonde and wore whipcord riding pants and a green silk shirt. She trailed perfume away from the table and Clara noticed Cobb's grin.

"Friend of yours, Cobb?"

"No, but I know who she is. That gal is famous. She used to run a place in Borger before they cleaned the town out last year."

"Oh."

"Andrews, it's going to be some town," Cobb said.

Lot Number 27, on Ranger between Cushing and Hogshooter. A hundred and twenty-five dollars. Sold to Ned

Barstow. He grinned at Clara. "Well, I'm going back into the drug business, for myself."

"A drug store, Ned? That's fine."

"I'll have to start out in a tent, and I expect I'll set it up tonight. But it will be a brick store before I'm done, Clara."

Lot Number 30, on Ranger fifty feet from Cushing, sold for a hundred and twenty dollars. The buyer was Sam Bloom, operator of the Lone Star Cleaners in Lebanon.

Lot Number 40, on Ranger near El Dorado, two hundred dollars. A thin man with a waxed black mustache who was nearly bald. He gave his name as Joe Franzini and said he was a barber. He paid twenty-five per cent of the purchase price.

Already there was activity in the town of Devant. Tents were going up along Ranger, defining the street. Railroad workers were unloading lumber from a flat car. Along Ranger Street men were drinking openly and throwing empty bottles and fruit jars into the street. Two Negroes were building a privy.

Lot Number 49, on Ranger between El Dorado and Cushing. A hundred and seventy-five dollars. To the gentleman from across the Pacific. He gave his name as John Lee and his deposit was made in silver dollars.

"There's your laundry," Cobb said.

Lot Number 53. Sold for a hundred and fifty dollars to a big man with small, well-kept hands. He took the money from a pocketbook that closed with a zipper. He was Robert Murdock, he said, and he planned to open a dry goods store.

Lot Number 60, on Ranger near Hogshooter. Sold for a hundred and fifty dollars to J. C. Adams of Lebanon, through Nolan Jennings, agent. So Devant would have a motion picture theater.

The sale dragged on through the afternoon. They sold out the main street solid for its full length of seven blocks.

They sold lots on the intersecting streets, in the residential district. Dust blew thin toward the hills and loose paper fluttered in the grass and was impaled in clumps of cactus.

Lot Number 283, on Beggs Street. Sold for seventy-five dollars to Thomas Buckley, a driller for the contractor employed by Will Andrews. He counted out the money in grimy bills that showed how they had been sweated over and guarded in a roll.

"Going to bring my family over, soon as I can put up some kind of house," he said.

Lot Number 291. Sold to the representative of a tool supply house. Lot Number 295. Sold to an agent of the Witter Lumber Yard. Will Andrews made a check of the receipts to date and there was more than eight thousand dollars in cash.

Cobb whistled. "I've got to hand it to you."

He returned to Lebanon then. It was growing dark and lanterns glowed inside a dozen tents, soft warm points of light. At one corner the headlamps of three automobiles had been focused on a lot where a dice game was in progress, and the lights reflected on empty bottles in the grass. Cobb thought that his father would have enjoyed the sale. It reminded him of stories of the Run, when they built their towns overnight. Tom Walters would have enjoyed it, and Cobb felt neglectful because he had not thought to bring his father here.

He eased his car into the traffic of Lebanon, passing around a big truck and trailer that had lost a wheel, and reached the public square. He saw two men at the east steps wiring a microphone and remembered the mass meeting. He remembered uneasily that he had to make a speech.

In the offices of the Cobb Walters Oil Company he found Jan Devant waiting with Nancy Jo. She was sitting by the window, looking out at the square.

"Hello," Cobb said. "You girls had supper?"

Jan shook her head, and Nancy Jo glanced up from her

typewriter. She winked at Cobb, and he was embarrassed. "I'm busy tonight," she said. "But thanks, Cobb."

He turned to Jan. "I want you around tonight. I need somebody to hold my hand. I got to make my first speech."

"You're not really nervous, are you?"

"You bet I am."

"Cobb, I didn't think there was anything in the world that could upset you." Jan laughed. "Did you, Nancy Jo?"

"Some things, maybe," Nancy Jo said, and winked again at Cobb. When she winked she rolled her open eye slightly, and her lips twisted to one side in an impish way that irritated Cobb.

"Come on, Jan," he said. "We'll go down to the Alamo."

But on the way downstairs he realized that there had been bravado in those winks, and that he had played his part poorly. He was uncomfortable as they waited for a table, and when they were seated he had no appetite. He kept glancing out at the courthouse lawn, where a crowd had gathered. Lights were flashed on and he saw a table on the steps, a microphone on it. The loudspeakers were above the courthouse doors, just below the second-floor windows.

"Jan, are you coming up there with me?"

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it. You know, Cobb, one reason I like to be around you is to see things happen. Things always seem to happen."

He hesitated. "But that ain't the only reason?"

"No, darling, that's not the only reason."

"Well, God knows what will happen when I try to make a speech." He pushed aside the plate of food that he had not eaten. "Jan, do you know what the gossip is around town?"

"I know some of the gossip."

"Did you know they're saying it's all off—between you and me?"

Jan flushed. "Where did you hear that?"

"I heard it. But I don't know where it came from."

"That's no accident," Jan said. "That's Pruitt."

Cobb leaned toward her. "Honey, maybe it's a mistake. Maybe we ought to slip away tonight, after the mass meeting. They say you can get married in a hurry over in Weatherford, and it ain't too far away."

Jan's lips were parted and her eyes were bright. She put her hand on his, and started to speak, then shook her head and leaned back in her chair. "No, that won't do. We shouldn't do anything impulsive. No elopements, Cobb."

"I think it's a hell of a fine idea."

She smiled. "I liked the idea."

"Then why not?"

She got to her feet. "Cobb, there's Ralph Paige over there, under the arc lights. Don't you think we'd better go over?"

Cobb followed her to the door, and as they crossed the street he said softly, "Well, you think about it, will you? Look, we can start out right after the meeting. We can be in Weatherford before midnight and I'll send a wire ahead to fix things up. How about it?"

He did not press for an answer, and they were both silent as they crossed the lawn. The crowd was gathered close around the eastern end of the building and they walked to the north entrance and followed a corridor to the east steps. Ralph Paige met them, and brought up a chair for Jan.

"I've done plenty of spadework around town," he said. "Don't you worry, Cobb, we've got everybody behind us on this and we'll need a special train to take the crowd down to Austin."

"I sure hope so. Ralph, this is bread and butter to us. I hope I can put that over."

Cobb looked down at the faces and swallowed. He brought out a cigarette and lit it. His throat was dry and

there was sweat on his forehead. He kept telling himself that he had come this far, he had drilled a well and discovered oil, he had formed an oil company. He had come this far and he would go ahead. Proration would not stop him. Nothing was going to stop him. And then he was aware that Ralph Paige had called the meeting to order and in a few words had summed up its purpose and was saying, "Our speaker tonight is Cobb Walters, president of the Cobb Walters Oil Company, the man who drilled the discovery well. Mr. Walters will tell you what proration would mean to us here in Lebanon and why we have to make a fight. Mr. Walters . . ."

Cobb stood up and moved over to the table. His hand found the staff of the microphone and he clutched it. He was self-conscious and his voice was unnaturally high, but his face was angrily red and he talked forcefully.

"Now is the time we've got to take a stand," he said. "Now at the very beginning. We've got to act before proration gets under way here. You and I know that proration is just a dream. It will never amount to anything. But we ain't going to have this oil field used as an experiment. They say that proration is to prevent waste, but I ask you, where does the waste come in? We're producing our oil in an orderly manner and we're selling it in an orderly manner. My company has a contract to deliver a hundred thousand barrels of crude within sixty days. Other operators have got similar contracts. And I ask you, how can we make them contracts good if we're held down to a hundred barrels or so for each well? Why, we couldn't do it and everybody knows we couldn't.

"Now let's take a look at proration. Let's see just what it is and see who it favors. All right then, we have proration and a particular well is gauged and they find it runs at the rate of, say, two thousand barrels in twenty-four hours, so the rated potential of that well is two thousand barrels. Now suppose they prorate this field and set the

allowable at ten per cent. Then that two-thousand-barrel well can only take out two hundred barrels a day. All right, then, I've got five producing wells and the only way I can increase my production is to drill more wells.

"Sure, drill more wells, at twenty thousand dollars each, and then take out only two hundred barrels a day from each well.—At sixty cents a barrel that's a hundred and twenty dollars a day. I ask you how long I'd have to produce that well to even begin to pay back the investment? I couldn't do it. I couldn't undertake a big drilling campaign. But, the big companies can. They've got plenty of capital. They can put down ten wells to my one. They can drill up their leases like a Swiss cheese and proration won't mean a damn thing to them. They've got plenty of money and if not they can always sell some bonds. So you can see the result. I go broke, the other independent operators go broke, and the whole proposition ends up in the hands of the big companies. It's A B C.

"And now let's get a little closer home. I ain't asking you people who aren't oil operators to shed any tears on my account. I'm just asking you to look after your own interests, because your interests and my interest are the same. What I want is to produce that oil and sell it and make money. And what do you want? You want me to sell that oil and make money so that you'll get your one-eighth royalty on every barrel sold. And a hell of a royalty you'll get on a two-thousand-barrel well if we have proration. As it is you get a hundred and fifty dollars a day off that well, but if we have proration what will you get? Fifteen dollars and that's all.

"So I ask you whether you want proration. I ask you whether you want Lebanon prorated for the benefit of the other oil fields, for the benefit of the people who have already taken millions of dollars of oil out of the ground. Yes, sir, they got theirs, and I say let's get ours.

"Hell, look at East Texas. It seems they've got three

good oil fields over there, discovered this fall, and are they prorating those fields? Hell, no. They're selling their oil for fifty and sixty cents a barrel, the same as we are, and they're shipping out just as much oil as they can, the same as we are. But we've got an advantage now. We've got a pipeline. And I ask you, are we going to give up that advantage? The hell we are. We're a new oil field, but we ain't going to be the stepchild of the oil business. We ain't going to be the orphan."

Cobb stepped back from the microphone, wiping his face, and above the sound of applause he heard a deep voice calling, "Mr. Paige, are questions from the floor in order?"

It was Will Andrews. Cobb saw his head above the crowd. Ralph Paige looked down. "I believe so. State your question."

"I have a question to ask Mr. Walters," Will said, and Cobb saw his tall figure moving quickly forward. He ran up the steps to the microphone. "The question I would like to ask Mr. Walters is what is the posted price of thirty-nine gravity crude oil today? I believe most of you know the answer. It was a dollar seven and now it's been cut to ninety-eight cents. But are we getting ninety-eight cents for our oil, Mr. Walters? No, we're not. We're selling it for less than sixty cents a barrel. We're losing thirty-eight cents on every barrel of oil we ship to the refinery. Isn't that right?"

Cobb was at a disadvantage, for Will Andrews remained at the microphone. Cobb raised his voice and he was somewhat hoarse. "We're shipping by tank car now, and that difference in price represents the freight charges. Partly, anyhow. And to begin with, we had to break into the market. The price of oil will go up."

Will Andrews raised one hand. "Oh, there I don't agree with you. I don't think the price will go up if we continue to produce this field at its peak. As it is, the state

of Texas is exceeding its statewide quota. It's exceeding the estimated market demand set up by the United States Bureau of Mines. That's no secret. All you have to do is look up the figures." He remained steadfastly at the microphone. "There's one point we ought to clarify, and that is just what proration is. In the first place proration is not an arbitrary regulation imposed on the oil business from the outside. It came from within the oil business, and that's the history of it.

"Let's go back to Burkburnett. Everybody here has heard of Burk. They had one of the wildest booms of all there. Town lot drilling. Oil flowing down the main streets. The pipelines couldn't handle it all. There wasn't enough storage. So the oil men themselves got together. They held a mass meeting in Wichita Falls and petitioned the Railroad Commission to shut down the field for thirty days to clear up the transportation and storage congestion. So in 1919 the Railroad Commission issued the first proration order, acting under the Conservation Act. They shut down the field for five days. Even in those days, when 280 million cubic feet of gas was being wasted every day in the Ranger field, the oil men knew that something had to be done about it, some time.

"Now Mr. Walters has told you that proration will greatly reduce the income from the individual well. That is true. But he has not presented the full picture. We have down there in the rock a great quantity of oil. We don't know how much, but we do know there is just so much, and no more. Let's take a figure. Let's say there's a hundred million barrels which we will be able to recover, and that is a very generous estimate. But let's assume there's a hundred million barrels of oil down there. At current *posted* prices there is ninety-eight million dollars' worth of oil. But at the actual sales price today that oil is worth less than sixty million. So we're losing over thirty-eight million dollars and by George, that's an *actual* loss. Think

that over, if you can visualize losing that much money. I can't."

"This is a pretty long question you're asking, Mr. Andrews," Ralph Paige said.

Will smiled. "I'm coming to the question mark pretty soon. Now, as I was asking Mr. Walters, does he think that if we continue to produce this field at capacity the price of our oil will remain at high as even sixty cents? No, it won't. It will drop to fifty cents, to forty cents, probably as low as twenty-five cents a barrel, and we'll all lose by it. I'd like to ask Mr. Walters if he knows that they've brought in another well in East Texas, ten miles north of the Crim well, which came in for twenty-four thousand barrels over a month ago, and that the Crim well is ten miles north of the Joiner well, which was the discovery well in East Texas? And did he see this week's issue of the trade journals, by any chance? If he did he saw articles, based on the opinions of eminent geologists, that the three new fields in East Texas may be one and the same pool. And they are more than twenty miles apart!

"If they are the same pool, and the evidence is that they are, because the reservoir there is an ancient shoreline pinched off by the Sabine Uplift, what will happen to the price of oil is nobody's business. And even before the discovery of East Texas, even before the discovery here at Lebanon, this country was producing more oil than it could possibly consume. I tell you that without proration all the efforts to keep the supply somewhere in line with demand will go to hell and it's a certainty that the price of oil will go down to two bits a barrel and maybe less. Just figure out your royalty, gentlemen, on the basis of twenty-five cents a barrel.

"Now just one more word and I'm through. My question is finished. I want to ask Mr. Walters another question about proration. He told you that proration on a well basis would lead to extensive drilling that would break the

independent operators in the Lebanon field. But Mr. Walters assumes that proration will be on a straight well basis and that there will be no restriction on drilling. That is not the case. You can safely assume that drilling more than one well to ten or twenty acres will be forbidden, and you can safely assume that proration will take into account the amount of acres drained by a particular well. In that way every man will get his fair share of the oil, and what is more important, the oil in the meantime will be kept in the best storage space there is, where it can't evaporate, where it can't escape. And that is *underground*, where Nature kept it for millions of years. We can keep it there until the market is ready for it and then we can bring it up and sell it at a fair price. We'll not waste a drop of oil nor a foot of gas and we'll not waste one cent of our potential profits.

"Now I'd like to conclude with one more point. I'd like to ask Mr. Walters if he knows that most oil fields have lost money. That sounds paradoxical, but it's a fact. In many oil fields more money has been invested in drilling and production than the value of the oil taken out. And I'll ask Mr. Walters this, if he does not believe that if we continue to produce our oil at capacity and sell it at the present distress price and drill up this field in small units, with as many wells as there is room to drill . . . I ask Mr. Walters if that is not exactly what will happen in the Lebanon field? We'll bring up a hundred million barrels of oil and we'll get thirty million dollars for it and we'll spend *fifty* million to produce it!"

As Will stepped back from the microphone Ralph Paige looked at him with a doleful shake of his head, then turned to Cobb.

Cobb approached the microphone, his jaw set. "I don't believe any answer is expected from me. We're not dealing in astronomical calculations here. We're dealing in oil. Just greasy, smelly crude oil. We've discovered it and

we're entitled to sell it and get our money for it. And God knows this county needs the money. The farmers need it, the businessmen need it, and we're not going to wait twenty years to get it. We're going to get it now. We're not thinking about fifty million dollars, or fifty billion dollars or fifty septillion dollars. We're thinking of cash money right now. We're thinking of money to pay off our mortgages, to pay off frozen credits and give our business a chance to breathe, and we're going to get it *right now*."

He was interrupted by shouts and cheers, and Will Andrews smiled and spread his hands. Cobb waited for silence, his clenched fists resting on the table where the microphone stood. Then he said, "I propose that we appoint a delegation and we send that delegation down to the hearing in Austin and tell that Railroad Commission how we feel about proration. We ain't having any!"

Cobb turned away and Jan met him, took his hand. "Cobb, you were wonderful. I told you things always happen. You're always full of surprises."

"You know," Cobb said. "I don't trust that guy. I wish I knew what his angle was. He must have an angle."

He looked down at her, and the eager smile on her lips made him remember. He took her arm and led her inside the courthouse, into the dark corridor. "Listen. Let's go. Let's do it."

She was still smiling. "Cobb, it was fun to think about, but I can't. We can't. I have a sort of agreement with Father and I want to be fair to him. You see?"

"All right," Cobb said. "But still, that's what we ought to do. And it would sure put a stop to all that gossip."

"I'll put a stop to that gossip myself," Jan said. "I know where it came from."

23

THEY built a town in the prairie grass below the domed hills of the Lebanon oil field. On each side of the main street, over which a grader had been run as much for definition as for road improvement, there appeared overnight a town of tents and shacks, and within a week the tents were giving away to jerrybuilt houses. A hotel went up on the corner lot near the railroad, cheaply built, with beaverboard partitions, and all the rooms were taken. Apartment buildings were hammered together, rectangular frame shacks with a hall running from end to end and rooms opening off the hall, a window to a room. They called them "shotgun" houses, or "railroad" houses, and oil field workers paid high rents and could look out their windows at men dozing in the mud, against a building wall. The streets of Devant were clogged with unemployed.

Along the railroad tracks there were buildings of sheet iron that glistened in the sparkling winter air. There were welding shops, salvage shops where casing pulled from dry holes was reconditioned and offered for sale, tool supply houses with casing and bits stacked in a warehouse. There were tin garages, one room shacks. There were shanties patched of wood and tin. There were tents. There were unroofed buildings occupied while construction continued. And in all the boom town of Devant there was not a sign of paint.

John Lee hung out his laundry sign and draped his wash on clotheslines behind his shack. Next door was a bath-

house where a hot tub cost a dollar. Then there was the Burkburnett Café, a domino parlor, an ammunition store, a grocery store, another café. The City Mattress Factory of Lebanon opened a branch office in Devant and sold out its stock, and five chiropractors demonstrated the affinity of their occupation for oil boom towns.

Within a week there were four hotels under construction, where beds were rented in shifts, where cots brought a dollar a night, and a night was eight hours of continuous occupancy, at any time in the twenty-four. In tents and shacks were the brothels and saloons, and on the back streets men and women made their homes, in one-room shacks, in the railroad apartment buildings. No running water. Oil stoves for heat. They threw their refuse out the doors into the streets, into the alleys, and made a layer of gumbo in the sticky mud of the black waxy soil.

A green brew sold for fifty cents a bottle and was called beer. Whisky was seventy-five cents a drink. Sold in the saloons in small, thick glasses. Sold in cigar stores, poured out of fruit jars. Sold in the dance halls and the gambling houses, at seventy-five cents a drink, three shots for two bucks.

Ruby Dwyer built the first house, a rectangle of corrugated iron two stories high, at the corner of Hogshooter and Ranger, and by an instinctive zoning the other dance halls fell in line along Hogshooter Street and it came to be called Red Hot Street in Devant. There was sawdust on the rough floors of the dance halls, and there was mechanical music, but Ruby Dwyer brought a six-piece orchestra to play for the opening of her place, which she called Ruby's White Way. The band drank her whisky, free, and it continued playing through the next day, sometimes three pieces, sometimes two, occasionally all six instruments. At any hour it might begin to play. The orchestra was there the following night, and at the end of the second week it still was playing in Ruby Dwyer's place.

The other dance halls at first were tents, without an inch of dance floor, then frame buildings appeared, and signs which labeled them, the Lone Star Club, the Barrel House, and El Morocco. The public utility company ran power lines from Lebanon and neon signs appeared. Neon signs for Ruby's White Way, for the Hotel Tulsa, the Ritz, the Spa, the Claridge. You could rent an easy chair for a dollar a night.

In Lebanon they never called the town Devant. They named it Ragtown and they spoke the word with a little twisting of the lips that was like the smile of a brave child who had taken castor oil and was waiting for the promised chocolate. Ragtown came with oil, and the oil was all that counted then in Lebanon.

"But it will change," was the hopeful word in Lebanon. "It will settle down."

Every day the town grew. There was another tent, another frame house completed. None of the buildings had porches or front steps; even the stores along Ranger Street exposed unornamented walls to the street. Not even the hotels had galleries, and men stood on the street corners, in the mud, to talk, and occasionally to lend a hand to push a mired car free.

The trains of the Lebanon & County Railroad stopped at Devant, where the old feedhouse had been reconditioned as a passenger station by the installation of an oil stove and a ticket office. And every train brought more men to the boom town, while others arrived by automobile, many hitched rides on the highway, some walked. Posted on the drilling rigs, posted on the road where a skimming plant was being erected, were signs that said: *No Men Wanted*.

Every day made a change. Even after a two-day trip to Austin the boom town seemed to have widened its scar on the prairie. Cobb looked out the window as the train stopped at Devant. He saw men in boots tramping in the mud. He saw a woman in a fur coat, with a diamond brace-

let, who was wearing rubber boots. He saw the neon signs, burning in the daytime. He saw peanut and hamburger stands, the shingles of lease brokers, lawyers, an abstract company.

At the doors of the houses on the side streets were heaps of refuse and tin cans, from which occasionally there rose a pungent, thin smoke that added yet another odor to the raw smell of Ragtown. Along beside the right of way were piles of casing and tubing and massive Christmas trees, elaborate control heads that were a maze of valves. Trucks and mule teams passed, churning up the main street of the town. The mud was hub-deep, and there was talk of petitioning the county judge for an election on incorporation of the town so that streets might be paved and a sewer and water system installed. There was light and telephone service, supplied from Lebanon, and there was a jail. Already it had been suggested that the Texas Rangers come in and make the jail more useful.

Cobb had heard stories of the jail. It was a frame shack, erected in three days. It had two tiers of bunks and a series of posts in the center to which unruly prisoners were chained by the ankle. The jail rarely had the same prisoner for longer than one night. They were taken to Lebanon, prostitutes and bootleggers and gamblers, and fined a set fee of twenty dollars. The charge was contempt of court, or drunk and disorderly, and there were usually from five to twenty cases on the daily docket.

The train moved on, and the flimsy buildings passed from sight. Then there were only the oil derricks on the slope to see, the burning flares, and it was a relief when the oil field had been passed by, when the soft hills so caressingly molded came to view, and the town of Lebanon in the draw. The limestone courthouse with its silvered clock tower looked permanent and had a dignity of its own.

Cobb walked the three blocks from the station to his

office. Nancy Jo had seen him from the window and met him on the stairs, catching one of his hands in both of hers. "Tell me about it."

"There's not much to tell." He walked on to his desk. "We had a hearing and they had experts there to testify to what the allowable ought to be, and they had the pipeline company, to question them about how much oil they could buy, and that was about all. We talked ourselves blue in the face. We told them it would put hundreds of men out of work and that there wasn't a voice in favor of it here. No decision yet."

"I suppose you know the pipeline has begun to tie on, Cobb."

"Yes."

"And they're ready to make connections with your wells."

"Okay. Let 'em connect. The question is what are they going to pay? Are they going to pay the posted price for high gravity crude in the Mid-Continent field, or ain't they? I heard they weren't. I heard they claimed they couldn't pay the posted price so long as oil was being sold for less out of this field." Cobb sat down heavily, and stared at the pile of mail on his desk. "Anything important?"

"Bank stuff," Nancy Jo said. "There on your desk."

Cobb saw the letterhead of the Lebanon National Bank and opened the envelope. It was a formal notice that the first installment of his loan was due on the fifteenth of February. He took out his checkbook, dipped a pen in the ink of a desk-set Jan had given him for Christmas, and wrote a check. He looked at the row of figures and shook his head slightly. I'm a damn fool, sure enough, he thought, the way I threw that money around. There was eight thousand dollars for the Hines lease and the house and the piano and the new car and all that. I've spent

thirty-five thousand dollars out of that loan, leaving out what I got to pay to finish the house.

He glanced up at Nancy Jo. "You know, I discovered this oil field and I haven't made hardly anything out of it, except my salary. I'd like to declare a dividend, but I don't know. We've got a hundred thousand in loans outstanding and we've got bills up in the five figures and six wells drilling and not paid for yet. Say, if they prorate this field it's going to be a narrow squeak for us."

"Then why declare a dividend? I'm a stockholder, but I'm not complaining."

"Since when are you a stockholder?"

"Pop gave me two shares of stock."

Cobb smiled. "Know what they're worth? That is, based on what proven acreage is bringing now, that stock is worth five thousand dollars a share."

"Oh, boy," said Nancy Jo. "I can use it. I lost three hundred dollars last night, Cobb."

He handed her the check. "Put this in an envelope and mail it to my dear prospective father-in-law."

Nancy Jo glanced at it. "Thirty-one thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars! Whew!"

"The Abernathy well alone will pay that off in less than a month," Cobb said. "That is, if we don't have proration." He smiled up at her. "You said you lost three hundred dollars. How?"

"Don't bother your head with those trivial sums, Cobb."

"Well, how did you lose it?"

"In Ragtown."

"Yes, but how? Pocket picked? I tell you, somebody ought to build a fire under that sheriff. He hasn't done a damned thing about Ragtown. All he thinks about is drilling oil wells."

"I lost it gambling, you idiot," Nancy Jo said. "Watching the little wheel spin."

Cobb considered a moment. "Nancy Jo, you oughtn't to go over to Ragtown. That's no place for you."

"Oh, you talk like Ed. And anyhow, I've got to get my money back."

"Say, I believe you've really got the fever. You're a gambler, sure enough."

"Yes, and I don't always lose, either. The first time I went there I won two hundred dollars."

"Just a come-on," Cobb said. "Who took you there, anyhow?"

"Pruitt."

Cobb frowned, and she said quickly, "Oh, I'm discreet, if that's what you're thinking. I keep my mouth shut."

"I wasn't thinking anything of the kind. But listen here, if you go to Ragtown I want you to go in good company. The next time you want to go tell me, and I'll take you over."

"Oh, you bet." She snapped her fingers. "Tonight, then. We'll go tonight."

"No. Say, I just got back from Austin, and . . ."

"And you need cheering up," she interrupted. "Of course you do."

Cobb hesitated, looking at her bright eyes, thinking, this is no good. But like she said I need cheering up and I want to feel free and I don't want to go up to the Devants' with old Ardmore looking at me like a snapping turtle and sit in the parlor and talk to Jan or go to a movie or drive out to see the oil fields by night.

"All right," he said. "I'll take you over there. I'll pick you up about eight o'clock."

He telephoned Jan, told her that he had to work that night to catch up on two days' chores, and accepted an invitation for dinner. On the way to the Devant house he drove by the lot on Sycamore Street. Concrete had been poured for the foundation and the outline of the house was defined. It was to be wide and L-shaped, with a tile

roof widely overhung. Some of the building material already had been unloaded and Cobb went to look at the blocks of petrified wood. Here was a shattered piece that looked as if a tree had been struck by lightning millions of years ago; here was a section of log. The colors were warm and earthy and Cobb thought of them against the bluegrass he would import for the lawn, against the dark green of the hedges which would be fashioned into the shapes of birds and animals, rounded and precise.

He drove on to the Devant house. Always it required a certain stiffening of the spine to enter this house where he knew he was not welcome. Ardmore would meet him with forced cordiality and they would sit and smoke cigars and talk impersonally of impersonal matters, and Pruitt usually would not appear at all.

And at dinner the conversation would lag and the three of them would sit with slightly knit brows as they thought of words to fill the gaps of silence. That night Ardmore talked of East Texas. He said that apparently it was now accepted that the three producing areas in East Texas were one and the same oil field, which meant a productive area over thirty miles long. They discussed the geology of it. It was not an anticline. It was not a field where the formation had been fractured and uplifted by a great plug of salt, as was usually the case with the fields along the Gulf coast. It was something different. The ancient shoreline of a sea in Cretaceous time, flanking the Sabine Uplift and pinching in, forming a great sand lens in which God alone knew how many millions of barrels of oil had accumulated. Some said they'd take a billion barrels out of East Texas, a billion barrels of high gravity crude that was selling now for as low as thirty-five cents a barrel. There were wells in East Texas capable of producing twenty thousand barrels of oil daily and held to less only because of a shortage of available transportation facilities. The potential of the field was said to be a half million

barrels daily, and they were producing an estimated seventy-five thousand barrels a day, sold at thirty-five cents a barrel and some said even less. Why, said Ardmore, he'd been told that in the older fields it cost an operator twice that much per barrel just to raise the oil to the surface because of the costs of pumping and of forcing gas back into the rock to restore the pressure.

They had very nearly reached a discussion of proration by the time dinner was over, but neither wanted to talk about it. Ardmore was against proration in the Lebanon field, as Cobb was. But the operators in East Texas were against proration also. They had held mass meetings at Tyler and they were prepared to fight. East Texas oil at thirty-five cents a barrel, and as much of it as the railroads could transport, was something to ponder.

After dinner Ardmore left Jan and Cobb alone and walked off stiffly to his study. It was too cold now to sit on the porch, and they went to the parlor where there were gas logs in the fireplace. They sat and talked and watched the licking blue points of flame, and it was Jan who reminded Cobb when eight o'clock came.

"Didn't you say you had to work tonight, darling?"

"Yes, that's so." He did not meet her eyes. "I'd better go."

She went with him to the door, and he felt guilty as he drove on to the Paige house. But as soon as Nancy Jo was with him in the car his spirits lifted. She had the quality of making whatever they did seem exciting, and he realized that he had never been bored with Nancy Jo. Even in the office her enthusiasm and her unfailing energy made the work more interesting.

They took the highway to Devant, and soon the Lebanon field came to view. The drilling rigs were towers of light, and by the dark derricks the flares burned high in the air. The sky glowed like the sunset, with a mysterious pulsing of color, and at the drilling rigs the engines

thumped and there was a sound like anvil blows. It was a sight that always made Cobb breathe more deeply.

Then came the lights of Ragtown on the prairie, the neon signs, the harsh arc lights. Some of the bareness and the crudeness of the town was hidden by the night, and it might have been a permanent city that they were approaching; it might have been a city with the dignity of Lebanon, close to the soil on which it stood, with buildings of limestone quarried from the hilltops, with businesses that had grown with the town, with men who knew each other from the long association of families.

But when they turned off the highway into Ranger Street it was different. The unpainted boards were raw in the electric lights. The mud was scattered in clods on the flimsy boardwalks, the men who walked the streets were rough and raw like the buildings into which they went for pleasure. And still there were many tents.

The car slued in mud and rocked its way forward along Ranger Street. They passed the Big Hearted Grocery, Honest Bob Murdock's Store, the Burkburnett Café, the Del Rio. They came to Ruby's White Way, where the neon signs were red, and they heard a burst of drunken music from within, from the six-piece band that had come to play at Ruby Dwyer's opening and had remained.

"That's where we're going, Cobb," Nancy Jo said. "There across the way."

"You don't mean Ruby's White Way?"

"No. On the next corner."

Cobb parked the car at the curb, in a foot of mud and water. Lights flickered in their faces and Nancy Jo's eyes shone. "Cobb, it's really something."

Cobb smiled. "Nancy Jo, I believe you're a bad little girl at heart. You ought to be shocked by it all."

"Shocked? Why?"

"The rest of Lebanon is."

"Pooh. Half of Lebanon sneaks over here. Listen, you've

been too busy, or something. You don't know what's going on."

"All right. You show me."

They went toward the building on the corner, a square frame house with windows set so high that no one could look in from the street. There was a door with a sliding panel, and a sallow face looked out at them before the door was opened.

The square house had only one room, and it was square and had sawdust on the floor and curls of blue smoke that hung like streamers from the ceiling, where there was a blue cloud of it. On their right was an impenetrable group around a dice table. In the far corner was a poker game, with a sad-faced man watching each pot to take out the house cut. There was bird cage, a faro table, and in the center of the room, roulette.

Cobb bought chips for Nancy Jo and stood behind her at the roulette table. There were two other women playing, and one of them was Ruby Dwyer. She wore riding pants and a checked shirt with rawhide lacings at the throat. Her face was full and round and heavily powdered, but her eyes were the placid, smiling eyes of a fat woman. She did not seem hard, but Cobb knew something of her history. She had been in the burlesque circuit. She had run a place in Borger until the militia marched in to clean up the town, where thirty men had been shot, including the district attorney and four peace officers, in less than three years. Ruby Dwyer had been the girl in the burlesque theaters who walked across the stage with a fixed and inscrutable smile while the comedians made obscene remarks and struck each other with inflated bladders. She still had that smile.

Nancy Jo was playing the odd and even and Cobb looked around him. There was loud talk at the dice table in the corner, silence at the roulette table, silence at the poker tables.

"Cobb," Nancy Jo said. "Do you have your little medicine man with you?"

"Sure, I always carry him."

"May I borrow him for a minute?"

Cobb took out the medicine man and Nancy Jo held it clutched to her breast. Then she bet a number. She put ten dollars on number 26. The croupier called for final bets, spun the wheel. With all the noise of the dice game they could hear the clicking of the ball. It settled in a hole, the wheel slowed, and they saw the number. Twenty-six.

Nancy Jo cried out and squeezed Cobb's hand. The croupier did not even look up as his rake pushed over the chips she had won. She left her ten dollar counter on number 26 and turned to Cobb. They were close together in the crowd around the table, and he looked down into her eyes, saw the slight lift at the corners of her lips. "Cobb," she said. "You do bring me luck."

"I don't know. I'm not doing you any good."

Her eyelids lifted slightly, and then she turned back to the spinning wheel.

"We've got to behave like sensible people," Cobb said. "You and me are bad for each other, Nancy Jo. We're no good."

She bent forward, out of range of his whisper. She had knocked over her stack of chips and she assorted them, made another bet. A hundred dollars on the odd.

A man moved in beside Cobb and said, "Hello, there, Miss Paige. Back to try your luck again?"

Cobb turned and looked into the man's eyes, six inches away. They stared at each other, while Nancy Jo was saying, "I'm doing all right. I just hit it in the middle."

"Hello, Walters," Jesse Halliday said.

"Hello."

"The poker table is over in the corner."

Cobb shook his head. "No, thanks."

"I didn't know you two knew each other," Nancy Jo said.

"Sure, we've met," Cobb said.

"Jesse, I'm going to take your money tonight," said Nancy Jo. "I'm hot tonight."

Cobb raised his eyebrows. "Do you run this place, Halliday?"

"I sure do."

Cobb smiled. "Well, it's no dry hole. I can see that."

"We do all right."

"But still," Cobb said. "I don't get it. How'd you come to branch out?"

"I guess you saw my partner at the door. Frank O'Leary. He ran a place in Seminole and I dropped plenty there, so I thought I'd get some of it back. I thought I'd get on the receiving end for a change.—Why don't you two stop back in my office and we'll have us a nightcap?"

"Give us a couple more minutes, Jesse," Nancy Jo said.

Halliday rubbed the palm of his hand lightly along his jaw, where Cobb had hit him that night in the Hotel Territory in Tulsa, and when he took his hand away he was smiling. He walked away and Cobb said, "You're a little easy in the friends you make."

"Jesse? Oh, Jesse is harmless, Cobb."

"Is he?"

"Well, he runs a gambling house, I know. But I've always found him very considerate. Win or lose, he always asks us back for a drink, and he drove me home the other night."

"Oh, he *did*?"

"Pruitt passed out." Nancy Jo grimaced. "Jesse's all right. Where did you know him, Cobb?"

"Don't you remember? I worked on that well he drilled."

"Oh, yes. Of course."

"It's a funny thing, his running a gambling hell. He's

one of the sorriest gamblers I ever saw." Cobb laughed. "But I guess it's a short step, from oil man to gambler. It's logical, ain't it?"

Jesse Halliday was standing in the doorway of his office, a small room partitioned off in a corner of the gambling hall. Nancy Jo met his glance and said to Cobb, "Maybe we'd better go over."

"I ain't thirsty."

"But I am." She took his hand and gathered up her chips with the other.

"I guess we better cash in, then," Cobb said.

Nancy Jo had won two hundred dollars. She clipped the bills with an office paper clip and put them in her handbag. They made their way across the crowded floor to the doorway where Jesse Halliday waited. His office was a cubbyhole that contained a table and four chairs, a desk, and a horsehair sofa. On the table were three glasses and a pinch-bottle, a small bowl of ice.

Halliday shut the door behind them and mixed the drinks. "Ice is sure a luxury here in Ragtown," he said. "The ice truck from Lebanon makes two trips a day, but it's sold out as soon as it hits Ranger Street and they get plenty for it. Even water is hard come by. Seventy-five cents a barrel is what we got to pay."

"I wish we could get that much for oil," Cobb said.

Halliday's lips tightened. He went on pouring whisky in the glasses.

"The posted price is ninety-eight cents," Cobb said. "But the most we can get now is fifty cents, loaded on the tank cars." He sat down at the table and went on talking about oil. "They figure we're going to recover about fifteen thousand barrels to the acre here in the Lebanon field. If that's the case I ought to get up about twenty-five million barrels of oil."

"Cobb, let's don't talk oil," Nancy Jo said. "I'm sick of it."

"I was just comparing it to water," Cobb said. "I was just thinking, we get up that oil, and we get fifty cents a barrel for it, and without cracking its gasoline content is thirty-five per cent, so that they get nearly fifteen gallons of gasoline out of each barrel, and they retail that gas at sixteen cents a gallon and they sell the motor oil at two bits a quart and . . ."

"Stop it, Cobb," Nancy Jo broke in. "Here's your drink."

"And yet they're getting seventy-five cents a barrel for water," Cobb concluded. "It's a hell of a thing."

"But you can't drink gasoline," Nancy Jo said.

Jesse Halliday finished his drink. There were spots of color high under his eyes, and only Nancy Jo did not know why Cobb had talked of oil.

But when they returned to the smoke of the gambling room she said to Cobb, "Why is it?"

"Why is what?"

"That man hates you. You can see it."

"What the hell," Cobb said. "He had a dry hole. I made an oil well. That's all."

He led her past the roulette table and she protested, "Cobb, I don't want to go yet. Let's play some more."

He shook his head, and when they reached the boardwalk on Ranger Street she tugged at his arm. "I'll tell you what, let's take a look at Ruby's White Way. I'd like to see that place."

"No, sir," Cobb said. "Come on."

As they walked to his car she still was murmuring protests and he said, "It would be a pretty thing, wouldn't it? Miss Nancy Jo Paige, daughter of the head of the Chamber of Commerce, seen last night in Ruby's White Way in Ragtown. That would look swell in the papers, wouldn't it?"

He opened the door of the car and pushed her in. She smiled. "Ed wouldn't let anything like that get in the pa-

per, Cobb, and anyhow, you know I don't give a damn about my name. Not if it's linked with yours. If I was caught in hell I wouldn't mind if the papers said, 'Seen in Hades last night was Miss Nancy Jo Paige, escorted as usual by Cobb Walters.' "

"We're getting out of Ragtown," Cobb said. "And I don't want you coming back here, Nancy Jo. You stay away."

The command in his tone made her smile and sigh and settle back contentedly beside him.

24

TWO weeks later Nancy Jo Paige brought the afternoon's edition of the *Lebanon News* to Cobb in his office. She spread the paper on his desk and said nothing as he looked at the headline. The lead story reported that the Railroad Commission had issued an order "establishing field rules for conservation and the prevention of discrimination in the production of oil," to go into effect at midnight on the last day of March. An umpire had been named for the Lebanon field and the gauging of wells would be begun immediately.

"So that's that," Cobb said, and crumpled the newspaper and threw it into the wastebasket.

He was angry, but he had expected it. If any action had been taken in East Texas, he thought, it would be different. But the newspaper reported that word had come from Austin that there would be no proration in East Texas until after the first of April. It was too big; the problems were too many.

Cobb left his office in anger, and at the foot of the stairs Will Andrews called his name and approached him, smiling. "Cobb, it had to come," he said. "We're swamped with oil, and something had to be done about it. Say, they're going to cut the posted price of high gravity crude to sixty-one cents throughout the Mid-Continent as it is, and if things are let go the stripper wells of this state will have to be abandoned wholesale."

"You notice there's been no action in East Texas," Cobb said.

"Sure, but there will be. Some operators over there have formed a committee to co-operate with the Central Protraction Committee. They'll bring it under control, but it's a problem. Listen here, if those three areas out in East Texas are really one big field, then it's the biggest one ever. There's never been anything like it. Somebody coined a phrase for it. They called it unwelcome treasure."

Cobb wanted no discussion with Will Andrews. He nodded and walked on to his car. He drove to the oil field, and in the following days he spent much of his time at his rigs. He found release there. The newness had not worn off for him and he liked the activity of the fields. He liked the penetrant smell of the crude, the noise of the engines.

On the hillsides and in the draws, among the postoaks and on the bare hilltops, the derricks raised their blunt noses. The walking beams ticked away the hours like the related mechanisms of a giant timepiece, the engines puffed steam, white against the sumac. Oil had scarred and blackened the slopes where grass would not grow soon again. The upright cylinders of the gas traps, on platforms raised to provide gravity flow to the lease tanks, were set near the derricks and away from them the standpipes lifted the flares of burning gas high into the air. And on the marginal wells, which had never flowed, the pumping jacks swung smoothly up and down.

Among the rigs on the scarred surface of the land moved the men and women to whom this oil was not unwelcome treasure. The men and women who scrambled for it, fought for it, traced to some scribbled piece of paper, some X-marked signature duly recorded with the county clerk, the ownership of a tract of land and a treasure in oil that for two hundred million years and more had been stored in subterranean porous rock. Before the time of man an ancient sea had rolled over this country, billions of algae had died, fish and trees and minute organisms had fulfilled their cycle and sunk into the ooze, and nature by the slow

heat and pressure of millions of years had transformed them into oil. And now, in this fourth decade of the twentieth century, the oil had been discovered, and drills had been sunk to the oil sand, and if a man had a deed, if his grandfather had acquired forty acres for a keg of whisky, or for fifty dollars, or had homesteaded on it because the soil was rich and black and the Comanches had been driven back across the Red River to a reservation there—and if he had paid his taxes—then the oil belonged to him. And not only the oil beneath his forty acres, but all the oil there was down there, provided he could get it to the surface of the earth before his neighbor could. So he drilled down as fast as possible, and his neighbor drilled, and he reached the oil sand and let the oil flow up out of the rock, and as fast as possible he took it out, and in ten years he would empty this reservoir of ages. Then there would be misgivings and talk of oil shortage, and a ceaseless search for another storage of oil beneath some other forty acres. God help the man whose title was not clear.

It had been said before that oil reserves were dangerously low, and new fields had been discovered. Science had developed new ways to prospect for oil, science had developed new uses for the crude, but it was produced by men who thought only of the price of it, and it was sold for three dollars a barrel if oil was scarce, now at fifty cents a barrel in the Lebanon field. The gas was wasted, the gasoline in the wet gas was burned in flares, the lifting energy of the field was dissipated and some recoverable oil never would be brought up; some day there would be no more. Some day the oil would be exhausted. But the time was far distant. A hundred years was far distant. Twenty years was far distant. And there were always oil shales when the flush wells ceased to flow. In Scotland oil shales had been mined for three-quarters of a century; they were mining shales in France and Italy, Spain, Estonia and Australia. And in the meantime let science dis-

cover a new source of power and light, as oil had been discovered to replace the whale, as felt hats had replaced the beaver. Now the oil belonged to whoever brought it to the surface, as the bison had belonged to whoever could shoot a Sharp's rifle straight, the beaver to the man with the trap. It belonged to the man who could get it to the surface, and to him alone.

Will Andrews talked about correlative rights. He said that every operator had an inherent right to his share of the reservoir pressure, and that the waste of that energy by reckless operation should be prevented. He wanted legislation. He wanted the Federal government to step in, if necessary, but that was an unpopular view among oil men. They wanted no government interference, and they fought against it. They fought against a proposed bill to empower the Railroad Commission to control the gas-oil ratio of each well. They lobbied against a move for legislation to divorce pipeline ownership from the production and distribution branches of the industry. They lobbied against a proposal for a Congressional investigation of the oil business. Leave it to the oil men to keep their house in order, they said. And take a look at the record. In the year 1930 in the state of Texas alone the oil industry had paid 56.8 per cent of the total state revenue in taxes direct and indirect, and had expended \$666,446,000. The total value of the farm crop, be reminded, was \$434,512,000.

Cobb met these men and women in the Lebanon field and talked with them and agreed with them. They would come to see a well drilled in, and pay a twenty-five cent parking fee to the landowner. They would watch the completion, these men with shrewd faces and puckered foreheads, these sleek, hard women in fur coats and rubber boots. They would stand back from the well and they would ask, do you know anything you want to tell? Look, that's Cobb Walters, who drilled the discovery well. That fella in the big yellow car. . . . They mingled in the

crowd of farmers, of workmen unbelievably smeared with grease, and they were apart from the men who had plowed this land to plant their crops, from those who tended the huge engines of production.

There were scouts, oil supply agents, promoters, engineers, geologists, surveyors, gamblers, workers. And there were men out of work, men who saw the signs *No Men Wanted*, at the gates of the leases and at the skimming plants which had been built to buy cheap oil direct and extract the gasoline by the simplest of refining operations. These were the men for whom the oil industry was not depression-proof. And there were beggars on the streets of Lebanon and Ragtown. Small, frozen-faced boys with plaintive stories told in monotonous, memorized tones . . . Can you give me something to help us git home, Mister? We been visitin' my aunt in Tyler and we're on the way home to Abilene. We got no money for gasoline. . . . And there were men who cursed you if you couldn't spare a dime.

Even the beggars opposed proration. The gamblers opposed it. The prostitutes opposed it. The bartenders opposed it. The landowners opposed it. The thieves opposed it. And of course the oil men were against it.

In Ragtown they discussed proration in Ruby's White Way. They talked it over in the lobby of the Hotel Tulsa, the Burkburnett Café, in the houses along Red Hot Street. John Lee, the Chinese laundryman, gave his views along with the laundry ticket, and he was against it, too.

In the dance halls on Red Hot Street there were two thoughts, oil and money, and they were inseparable. The source of money was never in doubt in Devant, where the girls, when dancing with the oil field workers, wore overalls to protect their dresses from dungarees stiff with grease. If there was proration needed anywhere, some people said, it was on Red Hot Street, where there were a hundred whores.

The businessmen took their stand with the oil men, and they had the support of the banks. Frozen credits had been paid up by the farmers, mortgages had been lifted. There was a demand for automobiles, diamonds, Oriental rugs, peacocks, mahogany, building materials, bananas, Paris dresses, pineapples, silk hats, furniture, and for Kentucky thoroughbreds whose strong bones and firm muscles had derived from phosphorus and calcium supplied in the blue-grass and water of Kentucky by a subsoil limestone laid down, it happened, in that same Ordovician age when the sand of the Lebanon oil field had been deposited.

With the consensus of opinion such as it was, Arthur Shaw was not a popular man. When he arrived in Lebanon he was cordially received, but the only friendly greeting came from Will Andrews. Arthur Shaw was the umpire appointed by the Oil & Gas Division of the Railroad Commission to enforce proration in the Lebanon field, and there was considerable complaint that, while he was an agent of the state, his salary was to be paid by pro rata assessment of the operators in the field.

Arthur Shaw employed assistants and set about gauging the wells. The oil was run through two and one-half inch tubing into an empty flow tank for three hours, and the third hour's flow was taken as the basic gauge and was projected over a twenty-four hour period. If fifty barrels flowed into the tank in that third hour, then the official potential of the well was set at twelve hundred barrels daily and the well would have an allowable of one hundred and twenty barrels, ten per cent of the potential.

The Tropok Pipeline Company proceeded now with connections to the new wells. Its ten-inch line conducted oil to the pump station near Aldo Junction, where it was pushed along at four miles an hour through the long, underground trunk channels of delivery to the refineries. But some wells, which had been shut down for weeks after completion because they lacked connections, had made

contracts with the skimming plants in the field. Gathering lines conducted oil from these wells direct to the refineries, and the top price was forty cents a barrel, since only by obtaining oil at cheap prices could the skimming plants produce a cheap, but inferior, product and make a profit.

On the day proration went into effect Will Andrews drove to Cobb's rig on the Jay Paul lease with Arthur Shaw.

"Now, Cobb, it's not so bad, is it?" Will asked. "You can still produce plenty of oil, can't you?"

"I'll get along," Cobb said.

"You claim that proration is just a dream, Cobb, but believe me, it's the only way we'll save our skins. It isn't just the Lebanon field we have to consider. It's East Texas and the tremendous potential of that area. They're producing better than a hundred thousand barrels a day out there now, and it would be more if they had the outlet. Do you realize that there are over two hundred drilling wells in that field?"

"Sure, I know it," Cobb said. "And I know that it ain't been prorated yet, either."

Will Andrews shrugged and smiled at Arthur Shaw, and Cobb was angry as he watched them drive away.

Cobb was at the Jay Paul rig every day, and every morning he drove to Devant, to the field headquarters established by Arthur Shaw on Ranger Street, to report the previous day's run of oil. The Jay Paul well was an offset to a producer drilled by Will Andrews on the north, and Cobb was pushing the work to reach the sand and complete before the end of the gauging period.

The day the Jay Paul test reached the horizon proration had been in effect for more than a week, and when the well was completed the allowable would be only one hundred barrels a day until a gauge was taken and the potential fixed. The gauging period ended the following day and Cobb was just under the line; they were drilling in.

The wooden derrick trembled with the vibration as the bit pounded in the rock below, and Cobb was sitting on the lazy bench, waiting for the screw to be drilled, when he saw a car turn off the road toward the rig. To reach the derrick it passed through a field of bluebonnets that grew so thickly that spring that it could not be another dry year was coming. The close-petaled stalks lifted as brightly as that first year when they had appeared in the legend of the Indian girl who burned her doll as a token of sacrifice to break a drought and found next day a field of strange blue flowers growing in the color and shape of her doll's bonnet of blue jay feathers.

Cobb saw that it was Will Andrews in the car, and a girl was with him. He recognized the brightness of her blonde hair and smiled. Nearly every time he saw Clara now she was with Will Andrews. She drove with him nearly every day to the oil fields, and Cobb saw her whenever a well was drilled in, whether it was day or night.

Cobb got to his feet. "Come aboard," he called, and put out his hand to help Clara up beside him.

"Can you spare a minute, Cobb?" Will asked. "I have a matter to talk over with you."

"Go ahead." Cobb glanced at Clara. The floor shook under their feet; the derrick trembled.

"Cobb," Will Andrews said, "you and I have been on opposite sides of the fence in this proration squabble, but I expected you to take defeat with good grace."

"You know how I feel about it. If they had East Texas under proration, it would be different. But I don't see why we should be made the guinea pig. I don't see that at all."

"The Railroad Commission yesterday issued an order putting East Texas under proration on the tenth of April. Didn't you see that in the paper?"

"Sure I saw it, but I'm not expecting anything until I see it happen."

"Cobb, I want to ask you a direct question," Will Andrews said. "Are you or are you not abiding by proration?"

Cobb's mouth opened slightly. He glanced at Clara. "Why do you ask that?"

"Inasmuch as my wells are offset by yours, I think I have the right to ask. Two of your wells offset mine, and if you lower your pressure faster than I lower mine you'll establish a pressure gradient to your wells and I'll lose some oil."

"I'm taking my allowable, if that's what you mean," Cobb said. "Want to see my run tickets?"

"No."

"Well, then?" Cobb lit a cigarette.

"We were in Devant today, down by the station," Will Andrews said evenly. "I saw one string of ten tank cars loaded and another string run under your rack. Twenty tank cars adds up to about four thousand barrels of oil. And yet you admitted that you're running oil to the pipeline, too."

Cobb blew out smoke. "As I understand it, proration is designed to see that each man gets his share of the market outlet. Well, I'm taking my prorated share, and that's all. How much oil I run through my private gathering system, by way of my own loading rack, is nobody's business but mine. I'm not buying oil, so I don't come under the Common Purchasers' Act, and that's that."

"Then you *are* violating proration?"

"I don't think so."

"But see here, boy, you loaded twenty tank cars, and you turned oil into the line."

"That's right. But as I said, how much oil I ship by tank car is nobody's business but mine, and I don't know what you can do about it."

"No? Well, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to complain to the attorney general and ask that a pen-

alty suit be brought. You're draining my land with your wells and it's little better than outright theft."

"Theft?" Cobb's face reddened and he measured the man's wide shoulders. Clara took a step toward them.

Will looked steadily at Cobb, his big, round jaw out-thrust. "If I abide by the law of this state and you don't, you steal the oil from under my land."

"If you take the trouble to look it up you'll find that ain't the law of this state," Cobb said. "You'll find there ain't practically a damn thing the Railroad Commission can do about it, and you'll find there's considerable difference of legal opinion as to whether the commission even has the right to promulgate proration rules, much less enforce them. I'm one of those who believe they don't and I've made up my mind I'm not going to submit to it. If you feel you're at a disadvantage, Andrews, all you got to do is open up your wells. There's no use being idealistic about this situation. You know, ideals and oil don't mix any better than oil and water."

"Only too frequently that's the case," Will Andrew said flatly. "I might as well warn you, Cobb, that failing all else I intend to bring suit to enjoin you from producing above the allowable."

"And I intend to fulfill my contracts," Cobb said.

Clara put one hand on Will's arm, and Cobb gave her a lopsided grin. "I'll see you in court, then," he said.

Will Andrews hesitated. His eyes were bright and hard. "I'll admit I had some idea of attempting to convince you that you had a certain responsibility, Cobb. A responsibility to the other producers, to the landowners and the royalty owners, and possibly even a broader responsibility. But I realize that this oil field is only a big jackpot to you, something you won in a poker game, and the only recourse I have is to go to law. But . . ."

"Look out!" the driller shouted, and there was a sudden hurtling shape and a crashing noise on the floor of the

rig. Will Andrews lifted his hands, his knees buckled, and he fell forward on his face at Clara's feet. He lay on his face with his arms stretched out, and there was blood welling up in the hair on top of his head. Clara dropped to her knees.

"Now take it easy," Cobb said. He squatted beside her, and the driller was saying, "I swear that girt missed him. It didn't hit him."

"Something hit him," Cobb said. "Look at his head."

He turned Will over and Clara took his head in her arms and dabbed at the wound with her handkerchief. She was sobbing and Cobb heard her whisper, "Oh, you poor darling . . ."

"It was this here bolt done it," the driller said, picking something up from the floor. "It's that green wood, Mr. Walters. She shrunk and pulled loose and down she come, girt and bolts and all."

Clara looked up at the driller's long face, the tool dresser's bright eyes. The engine had been shut down and there was no more vibration. "For God's sake, we've got to do something," she cried. "Cobb, he's unconscious. He's badly hurt."

"Just take it easy," Cobb said. "Joe, give me a hand, will you?"

They carried Will Andrews to Cobb's car, and Cobb said, "You sit in the back seat and hold his head, Clara, and I'll get him to a doctor as fast as I can. But take it easy. He ain't hurt."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," she said.

Cobb was worried as he drove across the pasture to a cattleguard and turned into the heavy traffic of the road. He sounded the horn steadily and mule teams flitted by, automobiles and trucks.

They reached Lebanon and he drove to the north side of the square, where Dr. Tanner had his offices. He called to a man on the sidewalk to help him and they carried

Will Andrews up a flight of steps to the doctor's office, into the examination room.

Cobb waited outside with Clara. She picked up a magazine, glanced at it, threw it down again. She walked quickly up and down on the thin carpet.

"He'll be all right," Cobb said.

Her lips drew tightly together. "If he is it's no fault of yours."

"Now see here, Clara, I couldn't help it. Accidents happen all the time."

"Yes, if you operate as you do, Cobb. I know how it happened. I've heard how they're using green lumber, and you are, too. You use green unseasoned lumber in your derrick and you know it's dangerous. You know very well it's dangerous."

"But see here, it might just as well have been *me* that was hit. I take a chance, too."

"Yes, you take a chance." She spaced the words, with a bitter emphasis. "You bet you do. You don't care whose life you risk, so long as you get your oil. You don't care who stands in your way, so long as you get what you're after. The only thing in the world you give a damn about is yourself."

Cobb shrugged his shoulders and color burned in Clara's cheeks. She said angrily, "Now you think you're bigger than anything else, because you happen to have a few acres of land and a big pool of oil underneath it. Because you're making lots of money. Because you've always had your way. And how did you get it, Cobb? Answer me that. You won it gambling. You won it in a poker game, and then you had to have the help of women to see you through. Oh, yes, Cobb, women mother you and women want to help you and I suppose they always will. But you know and I know that you never did a thing in your whole life to be proud of. You were just lucky."

"I know I'm lucky," Cobb said in a low, strained tone.

"Well, listen." Clara sighed, clasped her hands together. "I don't want to say anything in anger. Forget all that.—But, Cobb, why won't you listen to reason? Don't be so pig-headed and just give in gracefully. You can do it. I know what you're like underneath. I know you're honest and fair. Why don't you just own up you're beaten and give in, and why don't you be yourself again?"

Dr. Tanner came into the reception room, and stopped to gaze at both of them. A smile was on his face, and Clara dropped her eyes and bit her lip.

"He's all right," the doctor said. "It was a sharp blow, but the wound isn't serious. He'll require a few days' rest."

Cobb looked at Clara, nodded, and walked out of the room. He crossed the square, and when he reached his office Nancy Jo saw his face and asked, "Anything wrong?"

He shook his head, but still she watched his face. "It's this damned proration," Cobb said. "Will Andrews wants to sue me because he claims I'm draining his land."

"Does he have a suit?"

"I don't know. Maybe he has." Cobb frowned. "Nancy Jo, let me put a question to you. I want to know what you think."

"Yes?"

"Suppose I'm raising cotton and I make a big crop. I make a hundred bales of cotton. And everybody else in the county makes a big crop, too, and the price toboggans. And suppose those other farmers come to me and say, look here, we've made an agreement and we're going to sell only ten bales of cotton each and that way we'll get a better price for it. And suppose I have a mortgage to lift on my land, I have a lot of expenses to meet. What ought I to do?"

"I'd go right ahead and sell my oil, Cobb," Nancy Jo said.

Cobb looked at her and smiled, then went to his desk

and picked up the telephone. He gave the operator the number of Oliver Wade's office.

"Hello—Oliver?—This is Cobb Walters."

"Sure. What's on your mind, Cobb?"

"I got a legal problem for you. This is what I want done. I have contracts for the delivery of a hundred thousand barrels of crude oil within thirty days and under the allowable set for my wells I can't make delivery. But I've got my name on those contracts and I've got the oil. Now how about it? Can you get me some kind of injunction?"

"I don't see why not."

"Good. Then get busy on it, Oliver."

"Cobb, this is the picture. Under the law, as soon as I file suit you're exempt from any penalties that might be imposed under proration, pending final disposition of the suit. I'll go to court and I'll get a temporary stay and you can meet your obligations."

"Draw up the papers," Cobb said. "I'll be right over."

25

THERE was a sense of power such as Cobb had never known. This was his oil field. He had discovered it and he had fought for it. He had defied the authority of the state and had won out. With the filing of his suit proration collapsed in Lebanon County and production jumped to forty-five thousand barrels a day. Other operators opened up their valves and it gave Cobb satisfaction to see that Will Andrews must run his wells at capacity to protect his leases from flush production in offsetting wells.

Men stopped Cobb on the street to congratulate him; even Ardmore Devant shook his hand.

"An oil man's best friend is his lawyer," Cobb said. "And look here, it's happening in East Texas, too. They got half a dozen injunctions out there and the daily production is increasing by fifty thousand barrels a week. I hear they're running a hundred and eighty thousand barrels above their allowable."

But in the Lebanon field the erection of huge fifty-thousand-barrel storage tanks was begun, because the pipeline already was unable to handle all the oil produced. Another purchaser entered the field as soon as proration failed, thereby assuring an ample supply of cheap crude—a loading rack was built at Devant and gathering lines were run to the unconnected wells. The company offered thirty-five cents a barrel and the pipeline cut its posted price to forty-five cents.

In East Texas there were reports of oil sold at fifteen cents a barrel, and in the older oil fields operators com-

plained that conditions were ruinous. Their wells were on the pump and they maintained repressuring plants at which the cost of producing a barrel of oil was greater than the market price. The operators of stripper wells were talking of going on strike and shutting down their wells until the price recovered, until East Texas was effectively restricted.

There was no doubt now about East Texas. The three producing areas were one and the same: one huge pool, north and south, fifty-five miles; east and west, from three to nine miles. There were already more than five hundred wells, and it was estimated that if all were opened to capacity, if all had a market outlet, the field would produce more than three million barrels of oil a day.

But toward the end of April committees representing the East Texas operators agreed to submit to an allowable of one hundred and thirty thousand barrels on the first of May, scaled upward by gradual increases to a hundred and fifty thousand barrels. And as the first of May drew near three hundred thousand barrels of oil were taken daily from the ancient shoreline beside the Sabine Uplift.

By the second week of May the house Cobb was building had risen on the hill south of Lebanon, and he and Jan went to inspect it. As he drove along Sycamore Street that afternoon Cobb thought that the discovery of oil had not meant all it should to him. He had been so busy; there were so many details to occupy him. Normally the building of a house was an event in any man's life, something to watch over and pridefully to see take shape. He felt that he was missing much when Jan told him that she had been to the lot nearly every day.

The petrified wood was brilliant color in the spring sunlight. Bits of bark, logs that appeared to have been split by prehistoric lightning, broken limbs and knotholes which had the crystal glitter of silica, were mortared into the walls of the house. The effect was bright, hot color in which the mortar made sharp definition.

As they stood looking at the house Jan smiled. "Cobb, you'll have to admit that petrified wood makes it look rather garish."

He frowned. "Well, it's brighter than I thought it would be."

"It's original, at least. Darling, do you know what it reminds me of?"

"Maybe you'd better not tell me," he said glumly.

"It reminds me of a filling station," Jan said. "I'll tell you what we ought to have. We ought to have neon lights and a big sign: Cobbco Gas."

He flushed, and she quickly caught his hand. "Cobb, I didn't mean that. I love this house. And it's original. It's non-conformist, the same as you are. And whether it's beautiful or not doesn't make any difference. It's different, and so are you. But actually, Cobb, it *is* ugly."

"Yes, I guess it is," Cobb said. "But it's the only house I ever saw made entirely out of petrified wood."

"The only one," Jan said solemnly.

"Suppose we take a look inside."

They walked along the joists, inspected the walls and cupboards and closets and the room where Cobb planned to install a bar and billiard table. They stood at a mulioned window looking out at the tall grass where Cobb planned to have a lawn of imported bluegrass and he said diffidently, "See that yellow house down the street, the one with the brick portico. I rented it today." He glanced at her obliquely. "I'm going to move my folks in there."

"Oh, fine," Jan said. "Cobb, how are they? You never mention them. Do you know, I haven't seen them since they moved from Fossil Creek. I haven't seen them since we've been engaged."

"I guess that's so." Cobb avoided her eyes. "I'm driving out to see them this afternoon."

"You are? Then I'll go with you. Shall I go with you?"

"If you want to," Cobb said, and he was ashamed be-

cause he had seen so little of his parents in recent weeks, because he had never taken Jan to visit them. It was partly because of this that he had one day deposited ten thousand dollars to his father's credit in the Lebanon National Bank, that he had rented a house in Lebanon for them.

As Cobb thought about it he realized that in Jan also there was a certain diffidence, and guessed that his attitude was the cause of it. And it affected their relationship. He could not take her in his arms without self-consciousness. If they had been married at once, if they had not postponed the wedding, it would have been different, he thought. But now he had a sense of guilt that angered him. He could not help remembering Nancy Jo Paige and he could not avoid a sense of shame. The reaction was to make him stubborn, to make him dislike Jan's friends because they seemed settled and smug in a sort of life that was alien to him. When he was alone with Jan in their new house, he thought, it would be different.

The mailbox mounted on a wagonwheel had been repainted and his father's name was blocked out in crude letters. Cobb turned off into the lane, and as they came in under the pecan trees he saw his father and mother sitting on the porch. Tom Walters dropped his newspaper and got to his feet when he recognized Cobb's yellow car. He came down the steps in his carpet slippers.

Jan spoke first. "Hello, there."

Tom Walters smiled. "Well, Miss Jan, how are you?"

"We meant to get out here sooner, Dad," Cobb said. "But I sure have been busy. You know how it is."

His mother stood at the top step. "So you brought her out at last, son? Well, now, let's get a good look at you, Miss Jan. I swear you're prettier than ever. I can tell you we're mighty proud about it. Ain't we, Tom?"

"We sure are."

Jan blushed and looked at Cobb and he said quickly,

"Say, I made some plans for you two. Mom, how would you like to go and live in Lebanon?"

"Oh, now, we wouldn't live with you two," Ada Walters said. "But thank you, Cobb."

"Step up on the porch," Tom Walters said. "Step up and set, Miss Jan.—How do you like the little farm we got here?"

"It's lovely," Jan said.

"Of course it ain't up the old place, and we sure don't have pecan trees like we had over yonder. I used to say to Cobb that each one of them trees was the same as a U. S. gov'ment. . . ."

"Here, Miss Jan, set down," Cobb's mother broke in, and brought up her own rocking chair with the padded seat.

"Son," Tom Walters said. "What's this about going to Lebanon to live?"

"I took and rented a house for you. It's a six-room yellow house with a brick portico and your own water supply, out of a windmill. You'd be comfortable there, Dad."

Ada Walters looked at her son, then took off her spectacles. "Well, I declare," she said.

"How would you like to live in the city, Ada?" Tom asked.

"Well, we've done so much moving. I declare we have. We've only been here a few months and now we're talking about moving again. Tom, we hadn't moved since the prairie fire burned us out of the Cherokee Strip."

"You'll like this house, Mom," Cobb said. "You better come to town and take a look at it."

"You know, I kind of think Ada would like to go live in the city," Tom Walters said.

Ada Walters smiled. "I kind of think I would. But I don't know. What in the world is there for a person to do in the city, Cobb?"

"There's plenty of room to raise chickens," Cobb said.

Jan laughed. "Oh, you could have fun, Mrs. Walters. All sorts of things are going on, all the time. And you'll only be two blocks away from us. I'll teach you to play bridge. You and I will have us a time!"

Cobb thought that it was gracious of Jan, but he thought it was a little over-gracious. Bridge! He thought that her voice was slightly unnatural.

"My goodness," Ada said. "I'm not going to impose on you, Miss Jan. Tom and me want you and Cobb to understand that right now. We ain't going to impose on you two one bit."

"But you wouldn't be imposing," Jan cried.

"Anyhow, I've already rented the house," Cobb said with finality.

"You have, Cobb? Have you sure enough? Well!" His mother gave her head a shake. "Then I guess our minds are made up for us, Tom. I guess we'll just have to up-stake and move to the city. Now it will be kind of exciting, won't it?"

"I don't know but what it will."

"It's hard to keep things straight, with all this oil there is," Ada said. "Here we got a hired man doing the chores and Tom and me don't lift a finger. Well, I still churn butter and cook, and Tom tends the vegetables and helps with the milking, but what I mean is it's so different. I can just set and figure out what I want, like silk dresses and all that, and then I don't go and buy 'em because I know I can do it any time I want to.—And, Cobb, you remember Dolly Goback?"

"Yes, sure."

"Well, she's gone and got herself a husband."

"You don't say?" Cobb smiled.

"That is, she ain't married yet, but it's that young Joe Simmons, whose folks had this place. He works in Anson North's garage on the square."

"Joe's a good boy, but Dolly ought to marry a farmer

and live on a farm," Cobb said. "That's the life for her. She ought to raise up seven sons to pick cotton and hoe corn. That's what she's cut out for."

"Anyhow, she'll have a husband," Ada said with satisfaction. She looked at Jan. "Now you know I'm dying to ask. When is it going to be?"

"It's going to be the sixth of June," Jan said.

"What?" Cobb stared at her. "You didn't tell me that."

Jan smiled. "Is that satisfactory, sir?"

"You bet it is."

"Why, that's less than a month," Ada said.

Cobb was frowning, and he gave a short answer to a question his father asked about oil. Then he was sorry and he made an elaborate reply. And all the time he was uncomfortable, thinking that he should not have rented the house in Lebanon, he should have left his parents on the farm. But they were proud of him, and it was embarrassing. By the time he and Jan were ready to return to town Cobb was angry with himself, and when they were on the highway he drove in silence, watching the road.

"They're sweet, Cobb," Jan said. "They're awfully sweet people."

"I know they're just country folks," Cobb said. "I know that. But Dad is a good farmer. If he'd just had a little luck he'd of been better off."

"Cobb, I've known them all my life. Have you forgotten that?"

"Yes, so you have."

"And I love them," Jan said. "Cobb, they helped raise me up."

Cobb nodded. "The trouble with Dad was he never had any initiative. He didn't think ahead. He was just contented to work the same cotton patch each year and never add nothing to it, and plow up the same old cornfield in the fall." Then a thought came to him. "But he loved to do it. He loved to farm. He'd handle that black dirt like

it was country butter. He liked to watch things grow." He hesitated, and in spite of himself he went on explaining his parents to Jan. "They're old-fashioned people, Mom and Dad, and when she talks about Lebanon as a city, she means it's the biggest city she ever saw. Oh, she's been to Dallas, but that was way back. I guess it was about the size of Lebanon when Mom went through there. I guess Mom don't even know what a cocktail is."

Jan laughed, then looked at him closely, then was silent. Cobb did not speak again until they were going up the hill to the Devant house, when he asked, "Have you told your father yet?"

"About June sixth? No. Cobb; I just picked that date on the spur of the moment. Your mother wanted to know. She wanted something definite."

"Hell fire," Cobb said. "So did I."

He pulled the car over to the curb. "Then it is definite, Jan?"

"I guess so."

Ardmore Devant came down from the porch to meet them. "Cobb, I have a half dozen messages for you. Anson North called you and Rob Witter called you and Ralph Paige, and Oliver Wade phoned three times."

Cobb groaned. "Now what's wrong?"

"They want you to come down to Oliver's office as soon as you can. It appears to be urgent, Cobb."

"All right. Thanks, Mr. Devant."

Cobb drove to town and climbed the exterior stairs to Oliver Wade's office, above the Lebanon National Bank. Ralph Paige and Anson North were waiting with Oliver, and when Cobb entered he stopped and looked at their sober faces.

"There he is at last," Ralph Paige said.

"Cobb, what do you know about this?" Oliver asked, standing up. "Did you ever hear anything about it before?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The suit, man, the suit. Didn't they tell you?"

"Nobody told me nothing."

"Cobb, is it true you won it in a poker game?" Ralph Paige asked. "Cobb, is that true?"

Cobb frowned and walked forward. "So.—What's happened, Oliver?"

"There's been a suit filed, Cobb, claiming you obtained those leases by fraud and under duress. He's suing for an accounting and petitions for a receiver to take over the property and operate it."

"Who's suing?" Cobb's face was white. "You mean Jesse Halliday?"

"Yes, that's the name."

"Let's get this straight," Cobb said. "He's suing me for *fraud*? For what fraud? I won those leases in a poker game, yes, but there wasn't any fraud about it."

Ralph Paige's face was gray. "Cobb, you never told us that."

"What was the occasion?—But it's no secret. I held a full house against his three jacks." Cobb managed a nervous laugh. "Say, you can't sue for a gambling debt in this state, can you? You can't sue to recover money lost in a poker game."

"No, it's a case of *pari delicto*, both sides equally guilty," Oliver Wade said. "But the suit isn't based on that."

"It's just a nuisance suit," Cobb said. "But why is he doing it, that's what I want to know. Why?"

"The allegations sound like more than a nuisance suit, Cobb."

"Then what in hell are the allegations?"

"I have the summons and complaint here. I accepted service for you, Cobb, and for the company." Oliver cleared his throat and picked up a sheaf of foolscap, blue-bound. "Briefly, he alleges that he was enticed into a room in the Hotel Territory in Tulsa, where he was plied with liquor by you and others party to the conspiracy. He al-

leges that he was induced to exchange valuable oil leases for chips in order to meet his losses, and that when he protested and promised to pay the money the next day he was assaulted and abused by the defendant, Cobb Walters. . . .”

“Good Lord,” Cobb said. “Listen, I went up to a room in the Hotel Territory to see a wildcatter about a job drilling. I never saw him before or anybody else in that room and Sandy Lake will bear that out. They were playing poker and I sat in and Halliday was cleaned. He brought out those leases and we set a valuation on ’em and he traded them in for chips. When the bank paid off I got those leases. That’s the way it happened.”

“Who else was in this game, Cobb?”

“Well, there was an oil man named Haley. It was his room. And there was . . . Well, offhand I can’t remember, Oliver.”

“I think you’d better make a trip to Tulsa and look those people up. We’ll need their testimony.”

“Okay.”

Oliver Wade grunted. “Cobb, according to the allegations, Halliday protested about being forced to sign over those leases and promised to deliver the money the next day, but you struck him and otherwise abused him.”

“Oh, Lord,” Cobb said. “As it happened I did hit him, but . . .”

“You *did* hit him?” Oliver said ominously.

“But it was because he talked out of turn,” Cobb said quickly. “And he pulled a gun on me.”

“He didn’t accuse you of cheating?” Oliver asked.

Cobb flushed. “Hell, no. Is that what it says?”

“About this blow you struck, Cobb. According to the complaint he was in a hospital for three days as a result of his injuries.”

“Don’t you believe it,” Cobb said. “That’s another damn lie.”

Oliver shrugged his shoulders. "He deposes that he was told he could redeem the leases the next day, but that when he was released from the hospital you nor none of the other alleged conspirators was to be found. He charges that you worked for him as a tool dresser and that in such capacity you obtained knowledge that the leases were valuable. He alleges on information and belief that he was not himself at the rig at that time and that you concealed a show of oil. . . ."

"You bet he wasn't at the rig," Cobb cried. "He was hiding out, because of the debts he ran up here. You know that. And as for a show of oil, the only show we had was a barrel he poured down the hole himself."

Oliver spread his hands slightly. "Cobb, he goes on to say that you had privy knowledge of a seep of oil."

"Now, listen, Oliver. I never found that oil seep until *after* I won those leases."

"He states, Cobb, that the oil seep was on your father's farm, where you were born and brought up. It's a little difficult to prove that you never saw it in all those years."

Cobb looked at the strained faces of the other men. "I'll go to Tulsa tomorrow and I'll bring back all the proof you need, Oliver. I'll get hold of the other men in that poker game."

But as he left Oliver Wade's office Cobb was not confident. He had an uneasy apprehension of the processes of law, and it was true he had not waited long for Halliday to redeem the leases.

He went to the offices of the Cobb Walters Oil Company and when he saw Nancy Jo Paige he knew from her face that she had heard about the suit. She came forward to meet him.

"What do you know?" Cobb said. "I'm a conspirator. I'm a confidence man. Did you ever hear of anything like that?"

Nancy Jo smiled. "Cobb, is that why you said Jesse was a sorry gambler?"

"Yes." He sank into his chair. "What I want to know is why? He can't win that suit and he knows it. Maybe he wants to be bought off, but I'll be damned if I'll pay him a cent." He frowned. "There's something behind this. There *must* be."

26

AS he crossed the bridge over the Arkansas River into Tulsa Cobb was not this time plagued by a sense of inferiority. Here in this oil capital of the Mid-Continent area they had heard of him. They knew of Cobb Walters and the discovery at Lebanon, and there were supply companies that had bid for his business. After all, Cobb thought, Tulsa was not such a bad city. Certainly it had imagination and a sort of community driving force that had not abated since the first small well came in at Red Fork. If you were in the chips, he thought, Tulsa was a fine town.

Cobb had reached Tulsa in six hours, and over those roads three hundred miles in six hours was fast driving. And all the way he had been frowning, biting his lip, tapping his forehead, trying to recall the names of the men who had sat around the poker table when he had won the spread of leases from Jesse Halliday.

The Hotel Territory. Cobb remembered how he had timidly entered this lobby, how he had found Jesse Halliday there and had collected fifty dollars for Nora, how he had returned that night in search of a job and had won the leases. His jaw was angrily set as he walked up to the desk.

No, Mr. Haley was not registered. Mr. Haley was not in Tulsa, as far as the clerk knew.

Cobb turned away. Was it Saunders? Was it Dickens? What were those names? He could visualize the faces across the green cloth that night. But he could not remember.

He glanced at the clerk. "Do you have any idea where I could find Mr. Haley?"

"No. I understand he's somewhere in East Texas."

Of course East Texas. Every oil man passed that way. There were many small leases in that huge area; there was opportunity for an independent with limited capital. Then East Texas it would be. Somewhere in that belt of piney woods, fifty-five miles long, from three to nine miles wide, Tom Haley must be found.

Was it Saunders? Yes, by God, it *was* Saunders. He turned again to the clerk. "Do you have a Mr. Saunders registered?"

The clerk sighed and thumbed through a file of cards. "There's a Miss Saunders."

Cobb shook his head. And was it Saunders, anyway?

Damn it, he thought, what I need is a good stiff drink.

He walked out of the lobby, and left the car parked at the curb. He walked three blocks, and turned in a door on Third Street, near the postoffice. He went to the end of a corridor, tapped on a door, and was admitted to the speak-easy, a room without windows in which there was a bar and an ornate backbar of quarter-sawed oak. Cobb went to the bar and ordered Bourbon whisky.

Saunders, Simmons, Sanders, Simpson. Simpson! By God, it was Simpson. Cobb gulped the whisky, and as he set down the glass he saw a lean man at the end of the bar. Light fell on his face from overhead and he had the brooding expression of a man deliberating whether to call a bet. Cobb had seen that expression across a poker table. He had seen that man across the poker table in Haley's room in the Hotel Territory.

He walked quickly to the end of the bar. "Mr. Simpson?"

The brooding eyes were raised. "Who are you?"

"My name is Cobb Walters. Maybe you remember . . ."

"Sure I remember. What are you drinking?"

"Bourbon," Cobb said. "I've been looking for you, Mr. Simpson, but somehow I had your name as Saunders, and . . ."

"My name happens to be Sampson—S-a-m-p-s-o-n."

"Oh, sure," Cobb said. "Well, I was close."

The bartender filled his glass and Sampson said sourly, "So you're Cobb Walters. You made that discovery in Lebanon County, didn't you?"

"That's me."

"Why don't you fellows listen to reason down there?" Sampson thrust out his underlip and cradled his glass on it. "You guys are ruining us all."

"Ruining you?" Cobb said. "How do we affect you?"

"You and that crowd in East Texas. Listen, the days of hog-wild production are over, or ought to be. The industry just can't stand it. We already had plenty of oil before you even made your discovery, before they brought in this big East Texas field. And now it's ruinous."

"That's the way it goes, though," Cobb said glibly. "There's too much oil or there ain't enough."

Sampson grunted. "Take my company. I'm manager of a company that's pumping stripper wells. They bought up a pattern of old wells and we're repressuring with gas and you know what it costs us to bring up one barrel of oil? It costs us sixty-eight cents. And you know what we can get for that barrel of oil? Sixty-one cents, and that won't last long. We had to shut down. We had to shut down tight. Now listen here, you fellows have got to accept proration. You're putting the rest of us out of business. You're putting men out of work."

"If they prorate East Texas, that's okay," Cobb said. "If it sticks in East Texas, we'll go along."

"They have proration out there. What are you talking about?"

"If you can call a hundred and fifty thousand barrels a day proration. And they ain't even complying with that."

Cobb ordered another round of drinks. "Say, Mr. Sampson, you remember the poker game that night?"

"You bet I do. I lost some money."

"First time I ever had a gun pulled on me," Cobb said. "That guy pulled a gun on me. Remember?"

Sampson's eyebrows were puckered. "Can't say I remember seeing a gun. I remember you clipped him, though. Jesse Halliday, wasn't it?" He looked at Cobb. "Did you say he had a gun?"

"Why, sure he did. I kicked it out of his hand and then I clipped him. Don't you remember? Haley took charge of the gun."

Sampson shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I was a little bit tight that night. Everybody was pretty tight, particularly Jesse."

"I didn't notice it," Cobb said.

"Oh, sure he was. And I remember I was plain drunk. I do have a hazy picture of your clipping him, though. It had something to do with those Lebanon leases, didn't it?"

"It did not," Cobb said.

"No? My recollection was that he didn't want to make out the assignment, or something. He wanted to go get the money in cash, I believe."

"I wonder where you got that recollection from?" Cobb said harshly. "That ain't the way it happened."

"Ain't it? That's the way I remember it, though. How about another Bourbon?"

"No," Cobb said. "Listen here. Think back. You remember he run out of dough and he took those leases out his pocket and we set a value of twenty cents an acre on 'em. . . ."

"Let's don't *argue* about it," Sampson said. "Hell, what difference does it make? You asked me if I remembered it and I told you I did. I remember he said he'd go get the money he owed and you said you'd take the leases and you and Haley agreed they was worth twenty cents, and

then you smacked Jesse and he said, all right, he'd make out the assignments. That's the way I remember it."

"I see," Cobb said.

"How about another Bourbon?"

Cobb shook his head. "Do you happen to know where Haley is?"

"Don't *you* know?" Sampson looked at Cobb closely.

"I believe he's down at Kilgore, ain't he?"

Cobb called the bartender and paid, then walked out to the street. He was beginning to understand and he said aloud as he walked to his car: "I don't need a diagram. I been framed."

He started the engine and drove out of town on Highway 75. He passed through Sapulpa, where the oil wells groaned on the pump; he drove through the hills past Kiefer, where the Glenn pool boom had been; he passed the Beggs pool, which was one of the first, and within an hour he was in Okmulgee. Then the hills and coal mines of Henryetta and a long stretch of barren blacktop highway, with hardly a town, with the rounded hills enclosing him.

He came to a crossroads and on impulse turned the car. He drove on as fast as he could over a sandy road, and in the distance derricks came to view, spaced along a ridge. He turned off on another side road and among trees where mistletoe grew in clumps like birds' nests there was a red brick house with white Doric columns. A lane led to it among close-spaced steel derricks neat with aluminum paint. When he neared the house Cobb sounded his horn.

John Redbird appeared on the porch, shaded his eyes, and then raised one hand in greeting. Cobb jumped out of the car. They shook hands, and although the Indian's eyes seemed to find something of surpassing interest on the horizon, Cobb knew that the greeting was warm. Rosie Redbird came out of the house, grinning, and shook Cobb's hand, patted his arm. "So you come back, Cobb?"

"I'm just passing through," Cobb said. "I'm on my way to East Texas.—John, I sure do want to thank you for that medicine man. He brought me plenty of luck."

"Good," John Redbird said.

"He brought me luck at poker and he brought me luck at everything else I done," Cobb said. "But still I don't win at knock rummy."

Rosie Redbird grinned, and they went into the house. Cobb took the medicine man out of his pocket. "Here he is. That grease you see on him is oil that I drilled up. John, I thought while I was passing through it might make him a little more potent to bring him home again. I don't want him to run out of medicine."

"Cobb, maybe you believe in medicine more than me," John said and smiled.

Rosie went to the sideboard and brought a bottle and three glasses. It was Cointreau and they sat drinking the liqueur as if it were whisky. John Redbird had a taste for Cointreau and for chili con carne.

They had chili for supper. Rosie Redbird had learned how to melt fat and suet in an iron pot, how to season it with onion lightly fried, to mix in ground beef and chili powder and garlic and beans, and to cook it for hours at the back of her stove. It was good chili and she always kept a pot of it simmering.

After supper they drank more Cointreau and played knock rummy and Cobb lost again. It set him thinking. Was it only ten months ago that they had sat around the table in that shack by the dry hole that he and Sandy Lake had drilled? He had gone away then to find a job, with less than ten dollars in his pocket. Ten dollars and a medicine man. He had taken a job for a dollar a day, he had been broke again in Tulsa, he had won those leases in a poker game, he had formed a company and drilled a well, and he had discovered the Lebanon field. He had a dozen drilling wells. He had built a house; he was going to be married.

And it was only ten months ago that he had played knock rummy with John and Rosie Redbird on the hillside lease.

Cobb gave no thought that night to the suit against his company. He played knock rummy and lost two dollars and twenty-five cents, and slept on a feather bed in Rosie Redbird's guest room.

The next morning he was on his way again. On U. S. 75 to Atoka; by a state road to Hugo; on U. S. 271 over the flat land along the Red River, across the river toward Paris. He stopped at a roadside stand for hamburgers and coffee, then drove on. Blacktop, concrete, gravel. He entered the piney woods, and came over a hill at the foot of which was a town. There were oil derricks on the town lots and there were shacks and shanties and mud and crowds, and the name of the town was Gladewater. He was in the East Texas field.

Before the Joiner discovery well, a town of three hundred population, now the boom town of Gladewater. Cobb eased his way into the traffic and drove through on the road south, into the raw new oil field. Traffic was slow. There were mule teams and trucks and there were many children who darted across the highway. The derricks rose up around him, tall rotary rigs of yellow pine or structural steel. He came to Kilgore, and there were rigs on the edge of town, a derrick in a churchyard. He drove to the curb at the first hotel he came to, and he had to go no farther. Yes, a Mr. Haley was registered there, but he was at his lease. In the Joiner area, toward Overton.

Cobb drove on among the pine trees. On the right he saw the Crim well, the first big well in East Texas, which had come in ten miles north of the discovery well. Only five months ago and in those five months a lightly considered oil field had become the largest in the world, the greatest reservoir a drill had ever pierced. He turned right to Joinerville, a boom town on the highway, staked out the day after the discovery well was swabbed in, at the junc-

tion of the highway and a country road that led to the Joiner well. He stopped at an oil supply office and asked directions. Follow that clay road until you come to a cross-roads, turn right and about one mile you'll see a stone fence and a drilling rig. That will be Tom Haley's lease, on a forty-acre farm with a little white house. It's a funny thing about that farmer. He never owned that land, but he lived on it for fifteen years and he farmed it and went to paying taxes on it, and under the law of this here state it belongs to him. Feller who owned the land lived out of state and never bothered to come down until after the boom. Now he's out of luck. And it ain't the only case like that.

Nearly all the way Cobb was behind a four mule team drawing drill pipe, and he could not pass it on the narrow road, but when he turned at the crossroads the way was clear ahead of him. He reached a stone wall and turned in at an open gate toward a derrick of yellow pine. He heard the noise of the mud pumps and the engine and the clank of the rotary table.

Tom Haley was at the well, wearing khaki pants and lumberman's boots, a hickory shirt. Cobb felt a sense of relief when he saw the man's ruddy, honest face. He got out of the car and walked toward the rig. Haley looked at him, frowned, and then grinned in recognition. "Well," he said. "I hear you hit the jackpot sure enough?"

Cobb nodded, and they shook hands.

"And they tell me all Jesse Halliday got out of it was a dry hole." Haley laughed. "I'll never forget those three jacks he held." He brought out cigarettes. "What brings you over to East Texas, Walters? Ain't there enough oil for you in Lebanon County?"

"We've got an oil field, but not a flood like this here."

"It's a flood, all right. But they're fixing to dam it up. We had a proration order for the first of May, but in the two weeks since then we've had a hundred and sixty-two new wells completed. There's an injunction suit pending

in the Federal court and we're producing away above the allowable. Away above it."

"How much altogether?"

"They say three hundred thousand barrels, but I say half a million. The railroads are swamped with it and two pipelines are coming in. Our allowable is a hundred and fifty thousand barrels."

Cobb nodded. "They want to prorate us at twenty-five thousand barrels."

"But it don't stick?"

"Hell, no."

"Well, it ain't going to stick here. We got that Federal suit and about forty injunctions pending in the state courts. —But I don't know what we're going to do. The most you can get for a barrel of oil is a quarter, if you're lucky, and most of it is sold for fifteen cents and less. I heard of one contract at eight and a half cents a barrel and the best I can do is twelve cents. I've got one completed well and this one near the pay and the pipelines just won't give me a connection. They just won't connect up the new wells. So I had to contract with one of the prairie dog refineries here in the field and all I could get was twelve cents a barrel. And I can remember the days when we got two and a half a barrel for Ranger crude and it was bonus oil, too. A dollar bonus. And, man, they're bringing in wells at the rate of twenty a day. It's the damndest thing you ever saw. There was never anything like it."

Cobb nodded. "Compared to this, it's just a puddle we got over in Lebanon."

Haley shook his head slightly. "You can turn these big wells on and they'll flow any amount. My wells are right in the fairway. The west side of the sand is flanked by water driving the oil eastward to where the sand pinches out and I'm just enough east and not too far. I'm in the fairway."

"You were wondering why I'm here in East Texas,"

Cobb said. "This is the reason, Mr. Haley. I'm being sued for obtaining those Lebanon leases from Jesse Halliday by fraud and violence."

"The hell you say!"

"The charge is that there was a conspiracy to lure Jesse into a poker game in a hotel room and get him drunk and take him to the cleaners. The charge is that I had privy knowledge of the value of those leases and that I insisted he pay off his losses with them and that when he refused I assaulted him and sent him to the hospital for three days."

"Well, for God's sake."

"You know that ain't the way it happened," Cobb said.

"Of course it ain't."

"Some people kind of forgot. I saw this man Sampson in Tulsa and he couldn't seem to remember that Jesse drew a gun on me. He said he remembered it just as Jesse tells the story. If there's any fraud and conspiracy, that's where it is."

Haley looked at Cobb's face and grinned. "I can see you're pretty sore. I don't blame you. I suppose you want me as a witness?"

"You bet I do."

"Let's see now. This is the way I remember it. You came up to my room looking for a job, you and that sour old driller. What's his name?"

"Sandy Lake."

"Sure. Sandy. And I asked you to sit in on the game and you sat in and made a clean-up. And Jesse took those leases out of his pocket and the only reason we accepted them was because we didn't want to run him out of the game. And when he was cleaned you and him got in a fight and he pulled a gun and you took it off him and knocked him out."

"Exactly," Cobb said. "But there's another thing. He claims that when he got out of the hospital he went around

to redeem those leases and he couldn't find hide nor hair of either of us."

Haley laughed. "You know that's a damn lie. He was tickled to get rid of those leases and he never had a thought of redeeming them."

"No, but if he had, I suppose you were there in Tulsa."

Haley frowned. "As a matter of fact I went off to Colorado on a fishing trip a day or so after that game. But I was only gone a week, and I didn't hear from him after that. I swear I don't know what's got into Jesse. Do you suppose he thinks he can make that story stick?"

"I don't know," Cobb said. "I got an idea there's something more behind it."

"What?"

"I don't know. I just got that feeling."

And the suspicion persisted. On the long drive back to Lebanon Cobb considered. With Sampson to back up his story, with hospital records to support him, Jesse Halliday had a case, but Cobb felt that there was some reason for manufacturing the case. Possibly Jesse wanted to be bought off. . . . And what a hell of a time to go to Colorado on a fishing trip!

It was long after dark when Cobb reached Lebanon, and as he turned into the square he saw a light burning in the second-floor office of the Cobb Walters Oil Company. He climbed the stairs and found the door ajar, saw Nancy Jo Paige stooping at a file case. She heard his step and whirled.

"What in God's name are you doing here?" Cobb asked.

"Cobb! So you're back. Well, I need some help."

He went into the office and closed the door. "What goes on?"

"I'm just putting everything in order." Her eyes searched his face. "Cobb, you *know* about it, don't you?" She shook her head. "You don't.—They appointed a receiver for the company, Cobb, and your oil is going to be produced in escrow until that suit is settled."

Cobb nodded. "I expected that."

"He comes in tomorrow morning," Nancy Jo said. "It's Glenn Settle, Cobb. You know him, don't you? He has law offices on the west side of the square."

"Yes, I guess he's all right."

"I didn't want to touch your desk, Cobb. You'll attend to that, won't you?"

Cobb's eyes opened wide. "What about my desk?" He wet his lips. "Do you mean I have to move out?"

Nancy Jo nodded.

Cobb laughed. "I should of thought of that, but I never did. So I'm out in the cold."

"Until the suit is disposed of you are."

Cobb walked into his office and sat down at his desk. She followed him and he said to her, "So it means we don't any of us draw a cent out of this company for some time to come." He pulled open a drawer and began taking out papers. "I've been framed and it's not my fault, but I sure am sorry about all this. Nancy Jo, you tell your father not to worry. We won't lose this suit."

"Pop was kind of shocked," she said. "But he'll get over it."

Cobb grunted. "I suppose I'm not the boy hero around here any more."

"I'm afraid you're not, Cobb."

He slapped the papers down on the desk, and she brought him a box to put them in. "Cobb, did you find out anything in Tulsa?"

"Just that I been framed."

She waited, but that was all he said about it. Then she spoke, "I couldn't find out anything at all."

He glanced up at her.

"He just wouldn't talk about it, Cobb."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Jesse."

Cobb stood up. "You've been to Ragtown.—Nancy Jo,

I told you how I felt about that. Listen, you'll get into trouble, you'll get into real trouble, if you hang around that town. Nancy Jo, use your head."

"It was all right. I went over with Ed. I made him take me."

Cobb smiled faintly. "Anyhow, thanks for trying." He closed the box and tucked it under his arm. "So. I guess I'm a stranger here now.—Nancy Jo, are you going to keep your job?"

"Yes, Glenn Settle said everything would go on just as usual."

"Just as usual," Cobb said bitterly.

She touched his arm. "Darling, don't let it upset you. You'll beat them."

"Yes, I'll beat them. But in the meantime I'm out like the cat.—Nancy Jo, you and me need a drink."

"You bet we do."

"But not Ragtown," he said quickly. "We'll go to Jack Vibart's place."

"I don't care."

They turned out the lights and locked the office, and when they were in Cobb's car he sighed and said, "Well, I got money in the bank. I got forty-odd thousand in the bank, and I'm going to put that money to work some way, I guess I was a fool."

"How, Cobb?" She moved nearer him.

"Well, I borrowed some money and pledged my stock control to get it, and the purpose was to lend it to the company. But for one reason or another I never made that loan. I bought that lease off Phil Hines and there went eight thousand dollars. I'm building that house and it's costing me plenty. And I'd hate to say how much I spent. I'd hate to say."

Cobb took the road north and the flares of the oil field came to view. There was a drilling rig close beside the road, the lights bright in the spring night. Ahead of them

was a cluster of lights, the open-air tabernacle of the Lord's Adopted sect, where a spring meeting was in progress. As they neared it they heard the preacher's shouts and murmuring responses from the congregation. The tabernacle was ringed with automobiles and there was a town of tents like a boom town around the tabernacle.

Cobb found a space beside the road and parked the car. Around the tabernacle was a crowd of spectators, and on quilts spread on the grass children were sleeping, small limp forms covered with patchwork quilts, so that only a puny arm, a towhead, protruded.

"I got an idea," Cobb said. "We'll forget about that drink just now. We'll try a little religion instead."

Puzzled, she followed him to the edge of the tabernacle. A hundred yards away were the towered lights of a rotary rig and they heard the noise of drilling. The benches were crowded under the high rafters of the tabernacle, under the shingled roof where there were gaping holes. At the end of the building, where the pulpit was, there was a raised platform where on benches on either side of the pulpit sat the members of the congregation who had already gone forward, who had already squirmed and moaned in the hay at the base of the pulpit, who had raised their arms and shouted, "Hallelujah!" and closed their eyes and quivered and strained for ecstasy and had been delivered of their emotion as a woman over-due.

The preacher had taken off his coat and vest and his thumbs were hooked in his suspenders as he took quick steps backward and forward, as he bounced up and down on the balls of his feet. His voice was hoarse from three nights of preaching against the noise of the mud pumps, but the spring was in his feet and he bounced and shouted and a lock of black hair fell across his forehead. He came now to the edge of the platform and raised his hands.

"Ain't there someone here who wants to come forward and shake my hand? Is there a Baptist or a Methodist here?"

If there is we're glad to have you, brother, and I want you to come forward and let me tell you so. You don't have to stay. Just come forward and let me shake you by the hand and call you brother. . . ."

His right hand was extended and his bright eyes looked toward the far benches. "You don't have to stay. I just want to meet you. I want to meet all of you and call your name and shake you by the hand. Won't you please come forward . . ."

"Wait for me," Cobb said, and he moved into the light. He went to the center aisle and walked briskly toward the pulpit. He came to the pile of hay, and on either side of him men and women were kneeling. The preacher stepped down from the platform and took Cobb's hand. "Welcome, brother."

His left arm, hot and damp with sweat, went around Cobb's shoulders. "What's your name, brother?"

"Cobb Walters."

"Why, sure, Brother Cobb. I'm Brother Davis. You are welcome here in this church, brother, and I want to speak a word of peace and good will to you, under the eyes of Jesus. . . ."

"Thank you, Mr. Davis."

When Cobb returned along the center aisle Nancy Jo met him in the shadows, her eyes wide. "Cobb, what in hell . . ."

"I told you I had an idea," Cobb said. "It just came to me that maybe this land ain't under lease. They got about ten acres, and look at that tabernacle. The roof is about to bust through. They could use the dough and I just happened to wonder if the leasehounds passed this place up, just because it's church land and they never stopped to think. It's been that way before."

"So you went up there to see if you could get a lease?"

"That's it."

Nancy Jo laughed. "Well, what happened?"

"I just made myself known, that's all. We'll have to wait around until the meeting is over."

"But, Cobb, sometimes it goes on all night!"

"Not the preaching, though."

She stared at him. "Cobb, the thing I admire most about you is your objectivity. When you get an idea you act on it, don't you?"

"I got to," he said. "I got to put that money to work."

The meeting continued for half an hour. From the hay rose the constant sound of shouting and moaning, and the members came down from the platform and gathered in close groups around the individuals in the hay, exhorting them. Cobb recognized one of the women and grinned. Dolly Goback's face was screwed up and her eyes were raised to the ceiling; her hands were clenched to fists and as she shouted, "Praise the Lord," her body swayed and her lips jerked in a sort of spasm. Dolly had praises to shout that year and the lungs to shout them with, Cobb thought. She had oil and money and would soon have a husband.

At last the lights were flicked on and off, three times, as a signal that the meeting was formally over, but the suppliants remained in the hay. Cobb saw the preacher leave the platform, and went around behind the tabernacle to the rear door.

"Hello, Brother Cobb," the preacher said. "Now, say, it made me mighty happy to welcome you here tonight."

"It was an inspiring service, Mr. Davis," Cobb said. "I wonder if I could speak to you a minute."

"Sure you can. I'm never too busy to be of service. That's my mission, brother."

"I want to talk to you about a business matter," Cobb said.

"Business?"

"Yes. You see, it was kind of a surprise to me that your congregation hadn't moved to the other side of town, to

get away from the noise and the smell of this here oil field. You'd be better off on the south side, Mr. Davis."

"Perhaps we would, but we have our tabernacle here, and we are not a rich church."

"You could be," Cobb said. "Listen, have you got your land under lease?"

"We own this land, brother."

"I mean an oil and gas lease. Look here, you're right in the heart of the Lebanon field. You lease this land and drill a well and you'll make enough to build yourself a fine new tabernacle on the other side of town."

The preacher scratched his chin dubiously.

"You know me," Cobb said. "I'm the man who discovered this here oil field. That's my discovery well yonder on the hill, where the flare is. My land adjoins yours on the north. Now see here, I'm prepared to make you an offer. I'm prepared to pay you a bonus of a hundred dollars an acre for a lease on this land."

The preacher pursed his lips. "I don't know. I'd have to talk it over with the members. But I don't think they'd want to take less than five hundred dollars an acre."

"Maybe we can come to terms," Cobb said. "Five hundred dollars is too stiff a price, but let's talk it over."

"Of course I'll put it up to 'em, Brother Cobb, and see if they have a mind to sell. But I can't promise anything."

"I'll be back here tomorrow morning," Cobb said. "If you sign a lease I'll drill here on the edge of the tract and you won't have to move off at all. You can take your time."

"All right. Tomorrow morning."

They shook hands, and Cobb walked back to Nancy Jo. He grinned. "Honey, they can't keep me down. I'm going to get that lease and I'm going to drill a well. They just can't keep me down."

27

"JAN," Cobb said hesitantly, "you remember the other day, before I went up to Tulsa? Remember when we drove out to see my folks and you said it would be the sixth of June?"

"Yes." She was puzzled. They were on the gallery of the Devant house, shielded by ivy from the mid-morning sun.

"I was wondering," Cobb said. "Did you talk to Ardmore about it? Did you tell him that?"

"No, not yet. Why, Cobb?"

"Well, you see," Cobb began. He looked at her, bit his lip. "Well, I'll tell you, I don't think it will work out that way."

"Cobb, what is the matter?"

"You see, a lot has happened since then. They filed this suit against me and all that. I've got to be here early in June to testify and I've got to drill an oil well. I signed a lease on that Lord's Adopted tract this morning."

"For heaven's sake," Jan said, and sank into a rocking chair. "Cobb, do you mean you want to change it from June sixth? Is that what you mean?"

"I'm afraid we better."

"Darling, sit down a minute. Here, on the arm of my chair." She waited until he sat down, and took his hand. "You know, Cobb, this is getting to be routine. Honestly, it makes me wonder if you *want* to get married."

"Honey, don't say that." His fingers closed tightly on hers. "God knows I don't like the way it's worked out. But look, the reason is I don't know what's going to hap-

pen. It's all uncertain. Jan, I'm worried. If I should lose that suit I'll be flat broke."

"Oh." She looked up at his face. "Is it as bad as that?"

"I'm afraid it is."

She shook her head slightly. "I don't care about that. If that's what you're thinking, it's nothing at all."

He looked into her brown eyes and sucked in his breath. "Jan, it's been like a bad dream to me, where you want something and you can't quite seem to get it. And I'm scared as hell that I'm going to wake up before I do. But God Almighty, right now I don't know what's going to happen. I may be bust when this is over with, and I'm not going to put you in that spot. It's not fair to do it and I can't. I wouldn't feel right."

She nodded, and bent her head. "If it will make you feel better to wait, Cobb, I don't mind. Really, I'm resigned to it, and maybe you're right. Maybe we ought to wait until the stars are right."

He leaned down and kissed the nape of her neck. "The only thing about it was I wanted to know," he said. "I wanted to get this uncertainty over with, and win that suit and drill that oil well. You see?"

"Yes, of course. And I don't blame you. Please understand that. Yet I can't help feeling that we're losing something. . . ."

"Time," Cobb said. "It's just time we're losing. We couldn't ever lose anything else."

Her fingers pressed his, and she rose to her feet. "I know you want to do what you think is right, and probably it is best to wait until there aren't any worries. We want to start off on an even keel, don't we?"

"We will," Cobb said, and got up from the arm of the chair.

"Then it's understood, and we'll start off on a new page. We'll start off from now, Cobb. How is that?"

"Right," Cobb said. "And, honey, the minute this is over.

The day that suit is settled, that will be the day. Won't it?"

"It will, Cobb."

He glanced at his watch. "I got to get busy. I got a lease on that Lord's Adopted tract and I got to get busy and drill an oil well." He started toward the steps, but Jan did not walk with him. He reached the steps and turned, saw her looking at him.

"Well," she said. "We've sort of got engaged all over again. Don't I get kissed, Cobb?"

He went quickly to her. "Jan, I can't get over that feeling. I'm still scared to just step up and kiss you, like I had a right to do it." Then he understood that he had talked too much and he put his arms around her and kissed her tenderly. He felt a slight tremor of her lips.

Cobb was glad to get away, and he realized that he felt relieved. It was probably because he knew that if he was broke he had no business with Jan for a wife, he told himself. It was because he had a suit to defend and an oil well to drill; obligations to meet. And possibly it was because of Nancy Jo Paige.

But now he was beginning again. He was drilling a well again. He would get hold of Sandy Lake, he thought, and they would drill a well together, as they had in Oklahoma, as they had here in Lebanon in that last hot summer. They'd get some tools and Sandy would be the driller again and Cobb would dress tools again. Cobb was looking forward to it, but he found that Sandy Lake was ill. He had undergone an operation the night before, an emergency appendectomy, and Dr. Tanner said that it was from tasting so many cuttings in his long years as a driller. Bits of sandstone and limestone from strata deep in the earth had stuck in his appendix like pebbles in a rooster's craw.

Well, Cobb thought, I'll let that go. I'll get me a contractor and I'll push that well down as fast as I can. I'll

hit the pay in thirty days and I'll have one of those big rotary rigs to do it.

He went to a supply dealer and arranged to finance the well in oil payments. It was on proven acreage, and he obtained casing and a steel derrick by promising payment in oil at twice the value of the materials he purchased. Such payments were discountable at from fifty to sixty per cent at the banks. He could have the well drilled by a contractor for a share in the lease, but it was not necessary. He had cash on hand to pay the contractor. He had forty-seven thousand dollars in the bank, less three hundred dollars an acre for the ten-acre Lord's Adopted lease, but he had another note coming due. Still, he thought, he could pay the note and finance the well with oil payments and pay the contractor cash. If he drilled a well in thirty days, and if it came in for, say, two thousand barrels a day, and even if the price fell as low as two-bits a barrel, he could take in thirty thousand dollars before the next installment of the loan came due.

Cobb went to the office of a contractor who had drilled two wells for the Cobb Walters Oil Company. His name was Noah Forrest, and yes, he had tools and a crew available to spud in immediately. The contract price was two dollars a foot, and shut-down time was a hundred dollars a day. Cobb signed a contract.

Then he drove to the Lebanon National Bank, and on the sidewalk he saw Will Andrews smiling at him. "Cobb, I suppose you heard that the Railroad Commission issued another proration order?"

Cobb stared at him. "How do they get that way? I've got an injunction."

"The new order is presumed to void your suit, Cobb. It sets the allowable at thirty thousand barrels, with an increase of five thousand barrels every month until fifty thousand is reached."

"Well, another injunction will take care of that."

"Maybe," Will Andrews said. "But I tell you, Cobb,

there will be compliance pretty generally now. The Trading Post Oil Company has agreed to it, and naturally, so have I. And I happen to know, Cobb, that Glenn Settle feels it to be his duty, as receiver of the Cobb Walters Oil Company, to abide by the order so long as the other operators do."

"I wonder if you had anything to do with that?" Cobb said. "You got a way of getting what you go after, haven't you?"

As he went into the bank he thought that it was very convenient for the prorationists that Jesse Halliday had filed suit against the company, and suddenly he thought, I wonder if that's the reason for the whole damned thing. I knew it was a nuisance suit and I said Jesse could be bought off. And maybe he did get his. Maybe he got it for filing the suit and taking the company out of my hands. What was it Will Andrews said that time? What was it that cold fish said? Anyhow it showed he knew I won those leases in a poker game and it was way back before the suit was filed. He knew it, and Clara must have told him.

Cobb stamped into Ardmore Devant's office, and even in his anger he noted that Ardmore's greeting was cordial. The banker shook Cobb's hand and said, "Well, what can I do for you?"

So he's already talked to Jan, Cobb thought. He knows already that it's been put off for a while.

Cobb sat down across the desk from Ardmore. "I've got a note coming due, so I thought I'd stop in and attend to it."

"Certainly, Cobb. By the way, of course this receivership won't affect the company's obligations, will it?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that naturally the receiver will see to it that the notes this bank holds against the company are retired, and that the company's obligations to you personally will be met."

"Oh—sure," Cobb said, and he thought that Ardmore's eyes were unusually bright.

"I assume you loaned the money to the company on the same terms we loaned it to you, eh, Cobb?"

"Well, I wouldn't lend it at a loss," Cobb said, and took out his checkbook.

Ardmore smiled, and glanced at a calendar. "Not taking any chances of defaulting on that loan, are you? It doesn't come due until tomorrow, Cobb."

"Then I'll just post-date the check," Cobb said sourly.

Ardmore chuckled. "As you please.—Cobb, I see you're not going to let this suit stop you. Jan tells me you're drilling a well."

"Yes."

"Is it that Phil Hines lease?"

Cobb's head jerked up. "What do you know about that lease?"

"You know, Phil is a client of this bank, Cobb."

Cobb nodded. "As a matter of fact, I have a lease on that Lord's Adopted tract. Everybody passed it up, God knows why."

"Maybe it's because there's no oil under it."

"Oh, no. I'll make a well. I can't miss."

"That's good. That's fine."

Cobb walked out of the bank, thinking that he preferred Ardmore Devant in a less cordial mood, thinking that he should transfer his account to the City Bank. Ardmore knew too much. He knew about the Phil Hines lease and the check for eight thousand dollars. He knew how much Cobb had spent on the house he was building; he probably knew how much Cobb had paid for the Lord's Adopted lease and what it would cost to finance the well. Undoubtedly he knew that Cobb had never lent a cent to the Cobb Walters Oil Company. He knew too much about Cobb's affairs, altogether too much.

28

THE field of bluebonnets on the slope below the Abernathy well had been the first to go, and then the wild verbena and phlox and Indian blankets on the hillsides had withered and died. By the first of June the hills were brown and the sun was the summer sun. On the first of June Cobb's parents moved to the yellow house he had rented for them on Sycamore Street, on the first of June proration was resumed in the Lebanon field, and on the first of June the well on the Lord's Adopted tract was down two thousand feet.

That day there was an editorial in the *Lebanon News* on the subject of proration and Cobb read it at his lease.

Oil at prices as low as twenty-five cents a barrel is bringing home a valuable lesson in Lebanon County. The farmers are beginning to realize how much cheap oil is costing them, and operators are learning that even production at a fraction of the potential would be preferable, if the price is right, to flush production at distress prices.

Of course the situation in East Texas remains the major factor in consideration of price, but latest reports are that production figures have slumped in that area, although the allowable is still far exceeded. In general there appears to be a spirit of compliance in East Texas, possibly influenced by persistent talk of a special session of the Legislature to adopt a proposed conservation law which would provide that petroleum produced in excess of current reasonable market demand should constitute waste. With such a law there would be teeth in the enforcement of proration.

Cobb crumpled the newspaper and threw it on the ground beside the mud pit, where mud was mixed to a desired consistency to be forced by pumps up through the mud hose into the grief stem, through the grief stem and the drill pipe down to the bit and through outlets in the bit where it would cool the steel, plaster the sides of the hole, and seal up porous strata, reducing the need for casing.

Tom Walters often accompanied Cobb to the Lord's Adopted rig, and he was as much interested as if his son had sowed a field of wheat. Cobb explained it to him. The derrick of the rotary rig was a hundred and twenty-two feet high, taller than the cable tool derricks, and there were three boilers instead of the one boiler on a standard rig. In the center of the rig floor there was a steel turntable nearly three feet in diameter which gripped the grief stem and rotated on bearings turning in oil.

The lower end of the grief stem was screwed into the drill pipe, which was lengthened joint by joint as hole was made. At the bottom of the hole, attached to the drill pipe, the large fishtail bit revolved with the pipe and cut its way down through the rock. And constantly the mud pumps sent a stream of fluid mud through the mud hose into the watercourse of the grief stem and down through the drill pipe to the bottom of the hole. The rig was the Cobb Walters-Lord's Adopted No. 1, and it made hole fast.

Tom Walters enjoyed watching the drilling, and Cobb realized how much his father missed the activity of farming, even the sweat and the strain and the worry of it, the waxy soil like grease in his pores, the white dust a film on his face, the sun and south winds hot on his cheeks and searing the crops.

His knowledge of machinery came from an old tractor he once had owned. He had bought it second-hand, and it had been as big as a switch engine and drew a ten-disc plow. It was started with a huge iron crank that fitted in

a socket on the side of the tractor, and Cobb remembered how often the crank had stuck and was jerked from his father's hand and hurled high in the air when the engine turned over. The tractor had usually been broken down, and the mules curled their lips at it, other farmers laughed over it. Finally it had been left to rust in the south forty acres, but in the meantime Tom Walters, and Cobb, too, had learned more than the basic principles of the internal combustion engine.

Now Tom Walters regarded the complications of the rotary rig with the same eye that the old tractor had trained. He liked to listen to the rumble of the rotary table, the noise of the mud pumps and the roar of the steam, and to him it seemed as simple as digging a post-hole, and considerably less work. Mixing the mud and pumping it down made sense to him; it brought the complications of the machinery within the reasoning of practical knowledge. It was simple. You just turned that bit around and around and she bored her way down, and you poured the mud down the hole to cool off the bit.

And even a farmer's experience came in handy. One day he cocked his head on one side and looked at the bright, pale sky and the thin white clouds scattered on the horizon and said, "Cobb, do you know it ain't rained since the middle of March?"

Cobb smiled. "You don't need rain to make the oil come up, Dad. It ain't corn."

"No, but you got to have water to get down to it, don't you? You got to have plenty of water to mix that mud."

And that had set Cobb to frowning and looking at the sky. It was true it had not rained since the middle of March, and it was true that the hilltops had a brown hue and there was dust in the weeds and white dust on the road, and in the ground cracks showed where the soil had baked. On the country lanes snakes were hung belly side up on the barbed wire fences to bring on rain, and beyond

the dead snakes were stalks of corn that had turned brown in the hot sun.

"Hell," Cobb said. "It will come a rain pretty soon."

"If you was farming, you'd cross your fingers when you said that, son."

Cobb crossed his fingers.

Every day he went with his father to the lease, and they both watched the sky. The days passed, and still there was no gathering of clouds. And one day a truck and trailer turned off the road onto the adjoining tract, on land that was under lease to the Cobb Walters Oil Company, and unloaded timber for a rig. His own company had staked an offset to the well he was drilling.

Ed Drum drove out to the Lord's Adopted lease that afternoon, and seeing him, Cobb said, "Look! Look at that. See that rig they're setting up? It's an offset to my well, and you know who's drilling it? My own company, Ed!—Let's us go get boiled."

Ed looked past the tabernacle at the pile of lumber. "That's hard lines," he said tonelessly. "Cobb, may I speak to you a minute?"

"Sure."

They walked away from the noise of the mud pumps. "Cobb," Ed said. "Nancy Jo oughtn't to go over to Ragtown. She oughtn't to be seen there."

"I've told her that," Cobb said. "But you know how she is."

"Yes, I know. But she's been over there with you, Cobb."

"Oh," Cobb said. "Well, that's better than with just anybody. I couldn't stop her."

"I wonder if you tried, Cobb."

Cobb looked at Ed's pale, serious face, at his eyes that seemed bulbous behind the magnifying lenses of his spectacles. "She's been over there with you, too, Ed."

"Yes, she has, but I took care of her. I stayed sober. And, Cobb, you know how easily influenced Nancy Jo is."

"Oh, now, listen, I didn't get *too* drunk," Cobb said. "I had a few, sure, and no harm done. Anyhow, it was some time ago. I didn't take her over there again."

"Well, all right," Ed said.

"Listen, Ed," Cobb said quickly. "I saw that editorial you had in the paper the other day. Now you haven't turned supporter of proration, have you?"

"I think we ought to give it a fair trial."

"It's had one trial. It's going to bust us all if we don't look out. Ed, we've *got* to fight it. Now see here, you're a friend of mine. Let's stick together on this."

"I'm not so sure of that, Cobb," Ed said soberly.

"Of what?"

Ed wet his lips. "I don't think you're a friend of mine," he said, and walked away.

Cobb stood staring after him. He was acutely uncomfortable, and then he was angry. He followed Ed to his car. "Now don't say a thing like that and then walk off. Ed, if I've done anything you don't like I'm sorry. I'm sure sorry. What's on your mind?"

"Oh, never mind. Let's forget it."

"Hell, let's *do* forget it," Cobb said. "Let's you and me go off and do some serious drinking. It's been a long time since we done that together."

"Yes, it has."

"Then how about it?"

Ed's lips moved slightly, then relaxed in a smile. "I'd sure like to. But I got to get back to the office, Cobb. Sweetie . . ."

"Now just this once," Cobb said. "Just this once let Sweetie wonder where you're at and don't ever give her the satisfaction of telling her. Try it just this once."

Ed shook his head, but Cobb opened the door and got in the car. "Let's go."

As Ed turned the car around Cobb gazed back at the tabernacle. "There's irony for you. That's rubbing it in, all right."

"Oh, what do you care?" Ed said. "You're going to win that suit, so they're just drilling a well for you."

"I sure hope so. But damn it all, you never can tell what will happen in a court of law. I got no confidence in lawyers and judges.—Turn left here, Ed."

"Why? Where are we going?"

"Let's take a look at Ragtown."

Ed hesitated, then turned left. "When is that trial going to be, Cobb?"

"They've put it off until the end of the term, which will mean early in July, probably. Oliver Wade wanted a little more time, he said. Anyhow, I wish it would rain."

"What has rain got to do with it?"

"We need plenty of water for drilling mud, and the creek's about dry. Just one more thing to worry about."

It was dusk when they reached Ragtown and the lights seemed brighter than ever on this clear, warm night. The red and blue and yellow neon lights, the cold white electric signs—Ruby's White Way, the Burkburnett Café, the Hotel Tulsa.

"Where to?" Ed asked.

"How would you like to take a look at Ruby's White Way?"

"I don't know. That's a gay house, ain't it?"

"It's a dance hall, and they have a show. She used to be in burlesque and she has some girls and a burlesque show."

"I don't know," Ed said.

"Grab that parking space," Cobb said.

They got out on the boardwalk and Ed locked the car. He locked the spare tire with a chain and padlock. He took the cap off the gasoline tank and slipped it in his pocket.

"We'll just stay a little while, Cobb," Ed said. "Honest, I got to get back home."

Ruby's White Way: the sign flickered overhead; there was the sound of slipper-heels on the boards, the clatter of glass and the ceaseless low thunder of voices. Sawdust on the floor, a bar on the left and standing at the bar men could drink and watch a small stage at the back of the room.

As they paused just inside the door Ed's mouth opened and he nudged Cobb with his elbow. Behind the bar, at eye-level, was a series of paintings. Cobb looked at the murals of remarkably explicit nudes and laughed. They went to the bar and found space beside a heavy man with a face as brown as tobacco juice and the stub of a cigar chewed to pulp in the corner of his mouth.

Cobb ordered whisky and Ed stared at the painting of a red-headed nude behind the bar. "Good Lord," he said.

The man with the brown face lifted the corners of his lips. "You like 'em?"

"The pictures? They're kind of realistic, ain't they?"

"I painted 'em." He looked at the murals and grinned. "They are the damndest things." He edged his glass along the bar toward Cobb. "This is some place, ain't it? This is some town." He raised his eyes to the murals as he finished his drink. "You know, they sure tickle Ruby."

In the noisy room the sound of singing was thin and distant. Ruby Dwyer, with her full figure stuffed into a tight white evening gown, dominated the tiny stage. The chorus came on behind her, seven girls who sang in whining, cat-like voices and went about the business of a strip-tease as if preparing for a bath on a chilly morning. The men in the darkened room stamped and shouted, and the heavy man smiled and chewed his cigar and when the lights went up he said, "If you look around you'll recognize those girls."

"Huh?" Cobb said.

"On the wall. See? This blonde is the third from the right. Her name is Sue."

Cobb laughed.

"I did a bust of Ruby, too, and she's got it in her room. That's what got me started on these murals. It sure has been a lot of fun and I hate to leave." He signaled the bartender. "But I got to do it. My vacation is up."

"Vacation?" Ed said. "What do you mean by that?"

The man looked down his brown nose at the tip of his cigar. "I was just passing through here and I happened to stop and I made a sketch of Ruby while I was sitting here at a table. She saw it and the next day I started a portrait of her, then she got me to painting murals. That was three weeks ago.—Say, my name is Hal Carr."

"I'm Cobb Walters," Cobb said. "This is Mr. Drum. Did you say you'd been in this joint three weeks?"

"That's right. But I got to be back on the rim Monday."

"What do you mean, on the rim?"

"Copy desk," Ed said.

"That's right. I read copy on a Saint Louis newspaper. Painting is my hobby." He finished his drink as soon as the bartender poured it. "You know what I came down to Texas to paint? Bluebonnets."

They stood at the bar and talked and drank and the three of them were tipsy. Hal Carr told stories that became more and more obscene, and they all laughed hard at each of them. And then Hal Carr grew serious and his brown face became browner and his eyes dark and sad and he talked about the problems of a creative artist in this modern world. In this capitalist world, he said. He had studied at the National Academy of Design and he had worked two years in Montparnasse. He had headed back from Paris when the bonanza busted, he said, and because he'd been reading proof nights on an American newspaper in Paris he had been able to claim newspaper experience. But hell, he said, he couldn't even count characters. He read copy

on a newspaper by night so that he could have the daylight hours for painting and he had sold a few pictures, he said. There was a water-color he liked in a Boston museum, if you were ever up East, he said, and there were a few people in Saint Louis who bought pictures, but you couldn't live on the prices he got. He had been influenced by the Mexicans and he believed in art for the common people, and then he laughed and looked at the murals he had painted behind the bar and said that at least Ruby Dwyer was a patron of the arts.

"Ed," Cobb said. "We ought to do something about this guy."

"Do what?"

"I mean it ain't right. Look, a guy who can paint works of art like that has to work on a newspaper. Now is that right?"

"Looking at it that way, no, it's not," Ed said solemnly.

"Well, we got to do something," Cobb said. "We got to get him some commissions."

Hal Carr bought a round of drinks.

"Now why not?" Cobb said. "The *Lebanon News* can run a little feature about him. Hal Carr, the Saint Louis artist, on a visit to Lebanon. We'll find him a studio and we'll get him some commissions. How is that?"

"Why not?" Ed said.

"Big money, too," Cobb said. "A thousand dollars a portrait. Ain't that right, Hal?"

Ed blinked.

"That's just for the bust," Hal Carr said. "The full figure, naturally, is more."

"You think I'm kidding?" Cobb said. "I mean it. Let's have a little drink on that."

Ruby Dwyer came up to the bar then, and slapped Hal Carr's back and called him Michael Angelo. She ordered drinks on the house, and from then on the evening was rather hazy. Cobb liked Ruby's placid, smiling eyes, her

loud voice and jovial manner which would last as long as the drinks were paid for. When they were ready to leave she decided that Ed was too drunk to drive his car and that Hal Carr had better take them back to Lebanon. Cobb remembered saying that, hell, he could drive, and the next awareness was that the sunlight was bright in his eyes and that he had a headache.

He pressed his forehead into the pillow and groaned, and then he raised his head and saw a face brown as tobacco juice on the bed beside him and the stub of a cigar broken to crumbs on the blanket where Hal Carr lay, fully dressed and snoring. Cobb woke him up.

Hal Carr opened his eyes and gazed speculatively at the ceiling. He raised one hand, and Cobb left off shaking his shoulder.

"Let me figure it out," Hal Carr said. "Let me figure out for myself whose room I'm in. Sue? No, the crack on her ceiling looks like an oyster. This one looks like a Gila monster. Ruby? No, I'd smell the perfume. Possibly it's Melba's room, but, no, Melba snores."

"You're in my room," Cobb said. "But how in hell you got here, I don't know."

Hal Carr grinned. "I brought you home last night. The law helped me carry you upstairs."

"The law!"

"You remember. The one who wanted to take us all to jail."

"No, I don't remember."

"Reckless driving. Driving while intoxicated. You can get two years for that."

Cobb groaned. "Was I driving?"

Hal Carr reflected. "I don't remember. You or your friend."

Cobb went to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. "Anyhow you talked him out of it," Hal Carr said. "Or your friend did. Anyhow, we're not in jail, are we?"

"No, we're in the Lebanon House."

Hal Carr swung his feet over the edge of the bed. "I wonder if I've got any sense. If I have I'll start out for Saint Louis and I won't even go back there. I'll get back to work and probably I'll find another ten per cent cut waiting for me." He lay down again. "I'll be damned if I'll go back and take another ten per cent cut."

"You're making my head worse," Cobb said. "Let's go get a shave."

Hal Carr sat up again. "You must think I'm a damn fool. I guess I am.—I tell you what you can do, you can go over to Ruby's and collect my stuff and bring it to me."

"The hell I will."

Hal Carr sighed and picked up the frayed stub of the cigar. He peeled off the crumbled outer leaves and put the cigar in his mouth.

"Do you ever light that thing?" Cobb asked.

"No, it's just for my teeth. Just to chew on to keep my teeth good. Stops decay."

Cobb groaned. He rummaged in a drawer of his bureau and found a pint bottle, nearly full. He brought two glasses from the bathroom and poured stiff drinks.

"Say," Hal Carr said. "Are you the Cobb Walters Oil Company?"

"I'm the hollow shell of it." Cobb glanced at his watch. "Lord, it's after noon. I got to go."

Hal Carr raised his eyebrows. "You want to take me over to Ragtown first?"

"I thought you weren't going back."

"I've got to get my stuff."

Cobb poured more whisky in his glass; he was feeling better. "I got a date for lunch. I'll take you over there later."

"All right." Hal Carr expelled a prodigious breath. "I oughtn't to do it. I ought to stay away from there. But I love to watch that place operate. I like to sit back and

watch it." He glanced at Cobb. "Say, your friend runs the newspaper here, don't he?"

"Yes, the *Lebanon News*."

"I believe I'll walk over and talk to him, then. Remember what you were saying last night?"

Cobb shook his head.

Hal Carr opened his eyes owlshly. "You said maybe you'd like to have your portrait painted."

"Like one of those?" Cobb laughed. "Hell, I got my modesty."

"I mean it. I can paint a good portrait. Did you ever see the one I did of Ruby?"

"Listen, I got to go," Cobb said. He finished his drink. "I'll meet you here at three o'clock. Okay."

"I'll be here."

Cobb went to the North Garage and Joe Simmons brought out his car. "Your father drove it in last night, Mr. Walters. It seems you left it out in the oil fields."

"Oh," Cobb said. "Yes."

He drove to the Devant house and it was lunch time when he arrived and Ardmore and Jan were waiting on the porch. He knew that he was not entirely sober, but he could not keep silent. He talked loudly about proration and told Ardmore that East Texas was producing four hundred thousand barrels of oil a day and that there had been a hundred and eight completions the previous week and that the price was down to ten cents a barrel and that in spite of proration in the Lebanon field the price would go lower. And at lunch he spilled a glass of water and afterwards Jan took him to her father's den and made him lie down on a horsechair sofa. He slept for two hours and when he awakened he was in no mood for the sort of analytical conversation that Jan began as she sat in a rocking chair a yard away from him.

"Cobb, things are going to pieces. Don't you feel it? Can't we do something about it?"

"I'm sorry I was tight," Cobb said. "I had a good reason for it, but I sure am sorry, Jan."

"I don't mean just that, Cobb. It's us. There's something missing. Maybe when you know me close to I'm not what you expected. Is that it?"

Cobb sat up, and his head throbbed. "Jan, honey, you're more than I ever hoped for. I know I've been acting like a damn fool, but I've had so much to worry about. It's got me down. When it's all over, when this suit is settled, everything will be different and we'll go away and I'll make it up to you. I swear I will."

He got to his feet and Jan stood up and slipped into his arms. He kissed her cheeks and her eyes and they were moist. "Damn it, I'm a heel," Cobb said. "I'm just no good."

"I love you the way you are," she whispered. "But I was afraid. Sometimes I don't understand you, Cobb, and I was afraid."

"I'm through drinking," Cobb said. "Honey, I'm going to make it up to you."

"There's nothing to make up. As long as I *know*.—But, Cobb, let's be so there won't be any misunderstandings."

"Honey, we will," Cobb said.

And when he returned to the Lebanon House he felt warm and inspired. His jaw was set. He would complete that well, he'd win that suit, and then they'd go away, him and Jan, and they'd go away for a long, long time. . . .

He went up the stairs to his second-floor suite and he found the door ajar. He went in and stopped with his mouth open. Hal Carr stood in front of the mirror, smiling, and he was wearing Cobb's black and gray striped pants and Cobb's frock coat of black vicuña and Cobb's gray double-breasted waistcoat and patent leather shoes with black kid tops.

"Hey, those are my wedding clothes," Cobb said.

"Congratulations. I didn't know you were going to be married."

"Well, take 'em off," Cobb said.

Hal Carr's brown face lengthened soberly. "I just wanted a little front. There's nothing like front."

Cobb grinned. "That's a fact. But that happens to be *my* front, fella."

Hal slipped off the frock coat. "It doesn't matter. I'll try something else. Maybe that gray herringbone." He winked at Cobb. "I've got a commission."

"You've got a what?"

"I'm going to paint a portrait, through the friendly offices of Mr. Drum, and I have a studio, through the friendly offices of Mr. Drum, and I'm going to have a story about me in the paper, through the friendly offices of Mr. Drum."

"For God's sake," Cobb said. "I remember. Did Ed take all that seriously?"

Hal Carr was smiling. "His mother appeared to. You see, I walked over to the newspaper and Mr. Drum was out and I introduced myself to Mrs. Drum, and I suppose I let it slip that I was a portrait painter from Saint Louis."

"Go on," Cobb said.

"Well, Mr. Drum came in and he bore out the little fantasy, and Mrs. Drum is printing an interview in tomorrow's paper."

"You know what that sounds like to me," Cobb said. "It sounds like blackmail. Ed couldn't admit he was in Ruby's White Way and met you there. Yes, sir, that's blackmail."

Hal Carr smiled. "I have a studio, too. It seems a friend of Mr. Drum's, a Miss Paige, has an apartment over her garage that was built for a chauffeur or something and it has a north light and they're going to clean it up and let me use it."

"Listen," Cobb said, "you better watch your step. Can you even paint a portrait?"

"Of course I can paint a portrait. Any fifth-rate painter

can do a creditable portrait, and I'm about third-rate. I know how to go about it. I'll give 'em lots of fancy background and trick lighting and I'll make it as slick as a banana peel. They're going to love it."

"Culture comes to Lebanon," Cobb said.

"Do you know a Miss Goback?"

"Dolly Goback? Sure."

"Mr. Drum has her lined up as a prospect."

Cobb laughed. "You couldn't do better. They struck oil, all right. But she looks like a toad. What are you going to do about that?"

"I'll do what nature does, my friend. I'll give her so much protective coloration and so much beautiful background that you'll never know she's a toad." He slipped on the gray herringbone coat and turned toward the mirror. "By the way, my studio won't be ready for a couple of days. Suppose I put up with you until then?"

"You mean will I put up with you?" Cobb said. "All right. I guess I'm responsible for you. You can stay here."

29

IT seemed unreal to Cobb. It was July, and another dry year, and it had been July, and dry, when he had returned to Lebanon to work as a tool dresser on the Abernathy well. As he sat beside Oliver Wade in the second-floor courtroom the testimony made all that had happened seem unreal to him; it was incredible when he thought back.

Jesse Halliday was on the stand, and he had taken off his coat. His striped silk shirt clung wet to his lumpy shoulders as it had in those hot days of the previous summer, that first time in the hotel in Wichita Falls. Now, as Jesse Halliday told about it, the interview in the hotel room seemed more real than all the crude oil that had flowed out of the Lebanon anticline.

From the window Cobb could look out above the roofs of Lebanon and see the derricks of the oil field. He could see the bare, dry spread of the prairie and he thought that this year there was a double burden for the farmer whose land was outside the limits of the Lebanon structure, whose land doubly had failed to blossom. But those whose farms was under lease, who had sold royalty interests at high prices, who had seen oil flood their rugged acres, did not care about the drought. In the room above the Paige garage Dolly Goback was sitting for her portrait, in her sequin evening gown, and she planned it as a present for her husband on their wedding day.

It was the story of the poker game in the Hotel Territory in Tulsa that Jesse Halliday was telling now, and Cobb straightened in his chair.

"After a few hands it came to my notice that Sandy Lake was sitting right behind me, near enough to see my hand, and he was making signals to Cobb Walters." Jesse Halliday's voice was loud and confident. "He would clear his throat. Sandy Lake would clear his throat whenever I paired my hole card."

Cobb had known what sort of testimony was coming, but he was angry and turned his eyes aside. He saw Nora Joplin, sitting with Clara on a windowsill, and Nora grinned and winked and he felt better. He looked again toward the dry hills, where water again was the problem of the farmer and the cattleman, and the problem of the oil operator in the Lebanon field as well. Some rigs had been forced to shut down, and Cobb had imported water by tank truck at high cost to continue the well on the Lord's Adopted tract. And with his father he had watched for the thunder-heads that did not come.

"They kept my glass full of whisky," Jesse Halliday said. "I was pretty drunk that night and I couldn't win. When my dough was gone I wanted to go out and raise some more, but they wouldn't have it. Cobb Walters said I could put up my leases as security, but I objected and I said they were valuable leases and I wanted time to get the cash. Then Cobb Walters said I could redeem the leases the next day if I wanted, and him and Haley set an arbitrary value of twenty cents an acre and when I said no go Cobb Walters knocked me down and kicked me in the groin and he hit me again when I got up off the floor."

Jesse Halliday was sure of himself and he seemed to testify with a smacking of his lips, but he did not once glance toward Cobb. "They promised I could come around and redeem the leases and they said they'd hold 'em as collateral. I meant to come back with the money the next morning, but when I left the hotel I felt weak and I called a hack and went to the hospital. I was there three days with contusions and a dislocated jaw and when I got out

they told me Tom Haley had checked out of the hotel and I couldn't find where Cobb Walters had went to."

There was a long and meticulous cross-examination by Oliver Wade that set Judge Hatcher and even Cobb to nodding. Certainly he had not drawn a gun, said Jesse Halliday. He never carried a gun, said Jesse Halliday. What was his present occupation? He was a café owner. As a matter of fact, didn't he operate a gaming room? The witness declined to answer on constitutional grounds.

There was a sense of uncertainty in everything, Cobb was thinking—this suit, the whole damned oil business, everything that had meaning for him. The allowable in the East Texas field had been increased to two hundred and fifty thousand barrels daily and the producers in other Mid-Continent areas, where the booms had come and gone and the flush wells flowed no more, were on strike against the low price of oil and had shut down their pumps. There were a thousand of those big East Texas wells now, pouring out oil, and the Governor of the State of Texas had called the Legislature into special session to adopt new conservation laws to strengthen the hand of enforcement.

A heavy hand touched Cobb's shoulder and he looked up into Nora Joplin's gray eyes. He had not noticed that Jesse Halliday had left the stand and an adjournment had been taken until the following morning.

"Listen here, boy," Nora said. "That man is just a damn liar. Anybody can see he's a liar. Cobb, you put witnesses on that stand to tell how he cheated everybody in town."

Cobb smiled. "Don't worry. We'll do that, Nora."

He saw Clara in the crowd. She clasped her hands and held them up in front of her face. It was a gesture of friendship, easier than words, and Cobb felt warmly pleased, and he knew then how valuable her encouragement had always been. But there were others who came between them: Jan and Nancy Jo and Ralph Paige and Anson North. Cobb could tell from the faces of these men and women whom

he knew that they were impressed by the evidence, that they had lost confidence in him. But Nancy Jo had listened angrily and with complete belief in what Cobb had told her. He was grateful for her loyalty.

She walked with him along the corridor. Her eyes were bright and her voice was pitched low. "Cobb, I've seen so little of you lately. How is your well going?"

"We're about to make a well. They were taking a core this morning."

She laughed softly. "Cobb, who is this wild man Ed picked up? Who is this Hal Carr?"

"Why? What's he done?"

"Nothing. But he stamps up and down over the garage and shouts and roars and wakes me up at night. Is he mad?"

"I guess it's temperament," Cobb said.

"Is he really a good artist?"

They had come out on the square and were alone together. "Didn't Ed tell you the story?"

"No."

Cobb smiled. "How is that portrait of Dolly Goback coming?"

"I couldn't say. It's different every day. He gets it started and then he paints it out and starts it over again. It's kind of messy, and he seems to be tight most of the time."

Cobb saw his father approaching. Tom Walters tipped his hat to Nancy Jo, smiled, and said to Cobb, "They've been calling you on the phone, Cobb. They want to complete your well."

"Thanks," Cobb said. "We'd better get on out there."

"Cobb, why don't you come around some time?" Nancy Jo asked. "Come up and see that picture."

"I'll do that," Cobb said. "Right now I got to hurry."

He drove to the Lord's Adopted lease with his father, and at the well Noah Forrest, the contractor, walked to meet him. "It looks good, Cobb. The elevation is good and the core has a good saturation. Want to see it?"

Cobb looked at the sand that had come up in the core barrel and nodded. There remained hours of work to wash the drilling mud from the hole and complete, and Cobb went to the yellow house on Sycamore Street to have dinner with his parents. They did not talk about the suit. When he returned with his father after dinner it was dark and the rig lights were on. Cobb saw a short man who walked with a prancing step and tugged his cowlick of black hair; the Lord's Adopted preacher. He came up to Cobb, smiling. "Brother Cobb, they tell me it will be an oil well."

"Looks like it, Mr. Davis."

A half hour later the mud had been washed out of the hole and the well began to flow. Oil poured out of a pipe into the slush pond and the preacher went down to the edge of the pond and squatted there and dipped his hands in the oil and what he was saying Cobb did not hear.

The oil was turned into the tanks and in the first hour it flowed over a hundred barrels. So the initial production was more than twenty-four hundred barrels a day. Cobb smiled. He had an oil well again.

Before he went to the courthouse the next morning Cobb was busy on the telephone. He reported the completion to Arthur Shaw, the umpire, and was told that his allowable was one hundred barrels a day until the next gauging period. Then he telephoned a supply dealer and ordered one hundred lengths of four-inch pipe and delivery during the day was promised.

At the resumption of the trial that morning the night clerk from the Hotel Territory took the stand, and Cobb remembered him more clearly, not when he had come up to Tom Haley's room to notarize Jesse Halliday's signature, but when he had looked Cobb and Sandy up and down that night when they had engaged a room.

Next there was a representative of a hospital in Tulsa, who produced records of Halliday's confinement there, and

Robert Sampson followed him on the stand. Cobb knew what was coming and he sat in sullen silence. It fitted into the pattern, but still he felt that he knew only a corner of it, only a corner of the pattern. Robert Sampson had no recollection of a gun, and as he remembered it, Cobb had struck Jesse Halliday and kicked him when he refused to make out the assignment. On cross-examination Oliver Wade could not break his story.

The plaintiff closed his case in mid-morning and Oliver began the presentation of Cobb's defense. He called Sandy Lake and Sandy denied that he had signaled the respondent during the poker game in the Hotel Territory. As a matter of fact he never caught a glimpse of Halliday's hole card, Sandy said. Yes, he had a small interest in the Cobb Walters Oil Company. Five shares. Had he paid for them? No, Cobb Walters give 'em to me.

Tom Haley took the witness stand next and grinned at Cobb and testified in a loud, confident tone and Cobb thought, thank God for an Irishman with an honest face. Those poker games in the Hotel Territory were a regular thing, Haley said, and Jesse Halliday had sat in on many of them. Sandy Lake and Cobb Walters were present because he had met Sandy on the street and had asked him to come up and see Halliday, who was looking for a crew for a wildcat well. There had been plenty of liquor. Sure, they cut out of the pot for it, but nobody plied anybody with it. The bottle was on the table and if you wanted a drink you poured yourself a shot, that was all. And Jesse lost and the leases were accepted only because they hadn't wanted to run Jesse out of the game. Sure, it was agreed that he could redeem them, but he never showed up. It was three days before that fishing trip to Colorado.

At the noon recess they crossed the square to the Alamo Café, and Jan talked to Tom Haley about East Texas. He said that the Legislature had been called into special session, thank God, and that now maybe there would be some

action. Cobb left them and went to the telephone. Yes, the pipe had arrived, two thousand feet of it. Cobb called his father.

"Can you get hold of a gang of men who'll work all night for good pay and keep their mouths shut about it?"

"Why, sure I can. Easy."

"Then have 'em out at the lease, soon after dark."

"All right, son. What's it for?"

"I'll tell you when I see you out there."

There was one more witness that afternoon. It wasn't Dickens. It wasn't Thompson. It was Jack Tompkins, and he had been the fifth player in the poker game in Tulsa, and Tom Haley had brought him along from East Texas. He was a nervous, impatient man, anxious to get his testimony over with as quickly as possible, and when Cobb heard the way it went he sighed and relaxed and he was at ease when the trial was adjourned that afternoon until the following morning.

Jan had invited him to her house for dinner that evening, but Cobb refused. As soon as it was dark he picked up his father and they drove to the Lord's Adopted lease. Cobb explained, "We'll be working all night. We've got to dig a trench and run a pipe across to that topping plant. They're buying my oil."

"Can't you wait until tomorrow to do it, Cobb?"

Cobb glanced at his father, then said, "No."

Tom Walters rubbed his chin. "When a man has to do something after dark, Cobb, I don't like it."

Cobb stopped the car near the tabernacle and switched off the lights. "Dad, I better tell you the whole story, and then let's see if you'd do anything different. In the first place I owe the Lebanon National Bank better than sixty-two thousand dollars."

"Sixty-two thousand dollars!"

"This is the way it was," Cobb said. "I borrowed that money to lend to my company for a drilling campaign. But

it wasn't needed right away and so I made use of some of it. I bought some bad leases, and there went eight thousand dollars. I paid thirty-five thousand for that house. And I already paid back half that loan, which came to a total of a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. Of course I took some money out of the company in dividends, and I had about twelve thousand left when I started this well. You see?"

"You've got more of that loan coming due?"

"Thirty-one thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars on the fifteenth of August, and I haven't got the cash to pay it off. I've got Oliver Wade working on a plan to sell the Nancy Hanks to the main line, but with the pipeline here and proration they ain't eager to buy. So in the meantime I've got to sell my oil for what I can get, and under the proration rules I ain't supposed to run but a hundred barrels a day, and I haven't got a connection anyhow.—So I'm running a line over to that refinery and that's why I'm doing it after dark. What would you do?"

Tom Walters rubbed his chin. "Son, we'd better get to work."

Cobb grinned and patted his father's shoulder.

They worked in starlight, and the rig was dark. On the hills around them the gas flares spread a sunset glow and there were the bright lights of the drilling wells. But beside the Lord's Adopted tabernacle it was dark and the only noise was the engine of the ditching machine and the clank of pipe. The ditching machine belonged to the Tropok Pipeline Company, and had been used to lay the gathering line from Aldo Junction. For a hundred-dollar bribe Cobb had obtained it for the night, and the land to the refinery was level and free from rocks. They had to cut their way through two barbed wire fences and later repair the wire; they had to screw the pipe and lay it in the ditch and cover it with dirt; they had to connect the pipe underground with the flow line. But long before dawn the work was

done and Cobb turned a valve and the oil flowed to the refinery and the gas was burned at a standpipe there.

The next morning Cobb was called to the witness stand. He had not slept and his face showed the strain. He told the story from the beginning, when he had answered a newspaper advertisement in Wichita Falls, and the cross-examination lasted all that afternoon. Cobb's head was dizzy when it was over, dizzy from the questions. How long had he known about the oil seep? He had been born and brought up on that farm, he had played along Fossil Creek as a boy, and he had never found the oil seep until *after* he had won the leases, is that what he meant to tell this court? He had entered a poker game in Tulsa with only a hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket and he had won sixteen hundred and fifty dollars in cash, in addition to the block of leases, is that what he meant to tell this court? Had he ever won so much before? He said that he had struck Halliday because the plaintiff had called him a chiseler, but wasn't it a fact that it was because Halliday had accused him of cheating? Wasn't it because Halliday had accused him of receiving signals from Sandy Lake? And who had dealt the hand when Halliday had three jacks against Cobb's full house? It had been Cobb's deal, had it not? No, then was he sure it had been Haley's deal? And he had said that the leases were condemned by a dry hole, if that was the case why had he accepted them as security? If they were valueless why had he accepted them at the value of twenty cents an acre? Why had he refused to allow Halliday time to get the money in cash?

Judge Hatcher took the case under advisement and allowed each party fifteen days in which to file briefs, and Oliver Wade put his hand on Cobb's shoulder and told him not to worry.

"But how long before we get a decision, Oliver?"

"It may be quite some time, Cobb. You know Judge

Hatcher always makes a fishing trip in early summer and we may have to wait on that."

Cobb groaned. "I wish it was a jury. I wish we'd left it to a jury, then we'd get a decision right away.—Oliver, what do you really think?"

"It's a close one, Cobb, there's no use deceiving yourself on that. But we ought to win it."

Jan arranged a dinner party that night to take Cobb's mind off the suit. It was to be a small party, but a gay one, for, said Jan, wasn't this a good time to drink up some of the champagne that had been in the cellar since the previous fall, when their wedding had been postponed?

Cobb drove alone to the Lord's Adopted lease after the case was closed, and he found Arthur Shaw standing by the Christmas tree with a curious smile on his face.

"I had your report that you'd completed this well, Walters," the umpire said.

"So you came around to check up? Well, check ahead. I don't have a pipeline connection yet, so I'm shut down."

Arthur Shaw nodded and looked at the valves and hand-wheels of the Christmas tree. He put his hands on a wheel and tested it, but it was turned as far as it would go to the left, the arrows pointing toward closed. Cobb smiled faintly.

Arthur Shaw took out a package of cigarettes and offered one to Cobb. "I don't mind telling you, Walters, that I had a report you were going to sell oil to that refinery down the road."

"Is that so?"

"So I came around to make sure." The umpire smiled. "You understand that your allowable is one hundred barrels a day until we take a gauge at the end of the month?"

"Sure, I know that. But what of it? I don't have an outlet."

"You'll notify me as soon as you do have an outlet, then?"

"Sure."

"In the meantime you'll be shut down, and I'm going to

put a seal on your well, Walters. As soon as you have an outlet, of course, I'll break the seal."

Cobb hesitated, then drew deeply on his cigarette. "Okay, go ahead and seal it."

He watched the umpire heat a lead seal and seal the hand-wheel at the closed position. When he had finished Arthur Shaw said, "In view of the complaints, I have to take these steps, Walters. Yours isn't the only well, I assure you."

"So there have been complaints," Cobb said.

He watched in silence as Arthur Shaw walked to his car and drove away, then he glanced at the seal and grinned. The screw of the handwheel was a left-handed screw, and when the wheel was turned full to the right the valve was open. The handwheel was sealed, but the valve was wide open.

Cobb drove to the Devant house to drink champagne.

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IN the middle of July the rain came. A great thunderhead blew in from the east and within an hour there was a steady rush of water that poured down the hillsides and flooded the roads. During the night five inches fell and the next day no automobile could negotiate the roads to the oil field and cars were stuck on the main street of Devant. Rigs which needed supplies were shut down; the connection gangs had a holiday. But within two days the summer sun had dried the roads in deep, hard ruts; green leaves appeared on the trees, and the grass was briefly like spring on the prairie.

Cobb had watched anxiously for the thunderhead to come; he had prayed for rain. But now he cursed it and every day he went to look at a crop of volunteer oats that had sprung up in the field beside the Lord's Adopted tabernacle. After the rain the oats had appeared fresh and green in a long sweep to the near hill, where it ended abruptly at a barbed wire fence beyond which there was pasture grass.

The oats grew taller and grew more green, and as the days passed there appeared a streak of brown, a clearly marked line in the green field that ran from the Lord's Adopted tabernacle to the stills of the prairie dog refinery which was turning Cobb's oil into cheap gasoline and dumping the residue into earthen storage.

The line showed clearly where the soil had been turned by the ditching machine, and the scanty oats that had sprung up above the hidden line had turned brown and died. The oil came up hot from the rock below and flowed

hot into the pipe and the hot metal heated the ground and killed the oats at the roots and left a brown streak that showed exactly where the pipe was laid.

In those summer days Cobb watched the field of volunteer oats and waited anxiously for a decision from the district court, but July drew to an end and still no decision had been handed down. All Cobb heard was that on a fishing trip to Mexico Judge Hatcher had caught one hundred and eight pounds of fish in a single day.

There was an ominous quality in the news of oil; there was a sense of impending crisis in the black headlines. The Legislature was deadlocked in special session on revision of the conservation laws, and in the meantime oil operators in East Texas continued to disregard proration rules. The price structure of crude oil had been broken throughout the Mid-Continent area.

In Oklahoma there was a governor who had tried to colonize Bolivia, who had helped to write the constitution of the state, who had campaigned as a plain man and hitched rides and addressed crowds where he found them, whose campaign expenditures had been for crackers and cheese, which they said was all he had to eat. He had been elected and he had passed a law requiring that all bed sheets in hotels be nine feet long, to accommodate tall men such as himself and to aid the cotton farmer, and now he was talking about shutting down the oil fields in Oklahoma until the price of oil rose to one dollar a barrel.

"A buck or nothing," he was saying.

But still the huge flush wells poured out oil in the Oklahoma City field, within sight of the Governor's mansion, and they had a name for it. It was hot oil, produced in violation of proration rules. And in East Texas they were producing five hundred thousand barrels a day. They opened the valves and the crude oil flowed up from the shore-line of that ancient sea, forced along by the tremendous drive of captive water down below. They turned

the valves and the oil flowed at five, ten, twenty thousand barrels a day, and if they sold it for ten cents a barrel, if they sold it for a nickel, they made a profit. Railroad traffic was choked with tank cars, pipelines flowed at capacity, small topping plants which required cheap oil to make a profit had no lack of supply and the price was the cheapest ever.

Cobb saw the headlines in the newspapers, but he felt far removed from it. The oil business was not his concern. Waste and conservation were no concern of his so long as he could produce his oil and sell it for whatever he could get and put thirty-one thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars in the bank by the fifteenth of August.

The days passed in tension. He remembered his promise to Jan and did not drink. He remembered his trip to Ruby's White Way with Ed Drum and he did not telephone Nancy Jo Paige. But occasionally she called him to report on the affairs of the Cobb Walters Oil Company, to tell him how much oil was being run, and at what price, and when a well was expected to be completed and what the core barrel showed. One night she called him from her home, "Cobb, come up here a minute. I want to show you something."

"I'm sorry, Nancy Jo. I'm pretty busy."

"Just for a minute." She laughed softly. "Cobb, this is pretty funny. It's worth seeing."

"All right," Cobb said. "I'll come up."

He drove to the white house on the knoll and found Nancy Jo waiting under the porte-cochere. "Come on," she said. "This is the darnedest thing."

He followed her along the drive to the garage, to a flight of exterior steps that led to the apartment above the garage where Hal Carr had his studio.

"What's happened?" Cobb asked. "Has that madman been up to anything?"

"You'll see."

They climbed the stairs and Nancy Jo opened the door and turned on the light. Cobb walked in, and the easel was facing him. Those were Dolly Goback's eyes on the canvas, big and brown and placid. It was the wide flat shape of her face that emerged from a sticky mess of paint. But beneath the broad nose, sweeping outward to meticulous points, were mustaches longer and blacker than Cobb's father's had ever been.

Cobb stared at the painting, and Nancy Jo shut the door. "Where is that guy?" he asked.

"I don't know. He was stamping and yelling again last night, and that's the last I heard of him. When I got home from work I came up here and found this. Cobb, I told you that man was mad."

Cobb frowned. "Did he collect off Dolly Goback?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." She waved her hand toward the painting. "Cobb, why?"

"I guess Dolly was just too much for him," Cobb said. "What did he put the paint on with—a shovel?"

"I told you he painted it out two or three times and started again on top.—Cobb, what I want to know is where that man came from. Is he an artist?"

"I'll show you some of his work some time," Cobb said. "Is it good?"

"The best out-house drawing I ever saw. It's back of the bar in Ruby's White Way in Ragtown."

Nancy Jo stared at him, laughed, and dropped onto a sofa. She threw back her head, laughing.

"Me and Ed picked him up there one night," Cobb said. "I bet he's back there now."

She put her head on one side. "Let's go see."

Cobb grinned. "You have to know everything that's going on, don't you? You have to see everything. You have to try everything once."

"What's wrong with that? Cobb, you're getting very stuffy."

"I'm reformed," Cobb said.

She gazed at him, her eyes half-closed. "I guess it's the Devant influence. Cobb, when is the marriage coming off?"

"It will come off," Cobb said, and turned away. "Has Dolly seen that mustache yet?"

"No.—Cobb, I think he's cleared out. His luggage is gone, what there was of it. He took everything but a pint bottle of whisky."

"I can't understand his missing that."

"I suppose he overlooked it. It's Scotch. Want some?"

"No. I'm on the wagon."

Nancy Jo got to her feet and went to the bathroom. She returned with two glasses.

"I mean it," Cobb said.

She poured whisky in both their glasses. "Aren't you getting tired of it, Cobb?"

"Tired of what?"

"Living up to the Devants." She did not look toward him. "I wonder if Jan is the girl for you, Cobb, or if it's just something you have to get out of your system. Which is it?"

Cobb did not answer and she picked up her glass. "You don't like people to be frank, do you? But honestly, Cobb, don't you sometimes think that what you need is somebody with more spice? Somebody who can laugh at you and laugh with you and believe in you? Somebody to be your woman, Cobb."

He looked at her as she stood by the window, with her lazy eyelids drooping, her small, full lips pouted, her chin round and firm and defiantly lifted.

"I wonder if Jan will ever be your woman, Cobb," she said.

"Why not?" Cobb said.

"Why not! Why don't you say it, then? Why don't you say you love her? Why don't you say she's your woman?"

In God's name, why don't you *marry* her and get it over with?"

Cobb reached for the other glass. He drank the whisky and said in a low tone, "We'll be married pretty soon."

"People are beginning to wonder," Nancy Jo said. She poured her tumbler half-full of whisky. "And so am I."

"If I lose this suit I'll be broke," Cobb said. "We got to wait."

Nancy Jo stood looking at the portrait of Dolly Goback. "You know what I'd like to do?" she said. "I'd like to paint mustaches myself. He had something there."

"I don't follow."

"Well, when you can't do what you want to do you paint mustaches. Isn't that it? You fail at anything and you paint a mustache. At least you have defiance left. You can say to hell with it. Isn't that what Hal Carr did?"

"I guess it is."

"Then come on, Cobb. Let's paint mustaches."

Cobb looked at the tumbler in her hand; it was empty. "Let's skip the dramatics," he said.

"Oh, Cobb," Nancy Jo whispered. "I'm not defiant. Darling, just you kiss me once and then you can run along home. I'm not going to bounce at you."

Cobb put down his glass, started to speak, then turned slowly toward her. She came into his arms, her eyes closed. The tumbler fell from her hand and her arms were soft and heavy around his neck. "Oh, my darling," Nancy Jo whispered.

Dolly Goback's eyes, big and brown and soft, looked out at them from the canvas, in the expressive way of a woman gagged, and the black mustaches made points in her broad cheeks.

But in the light of morning the colors that had not shown by electric light came out and there was a purplish hue of cheek, a yellowish breadth of forehead, and the mustaches were blacker than before. Cobb looked at the painting and

the meaning of the mustaches was clear to him now, and not for some time did he glance at Nancy Jo. She was asleep, with her eyes squeezed tightly shut in a ray of sunlight from the window.

Cobb jumped to his feet. He remembered the car and ran to the window. It was morning and the yellow paint gleamed in the driveway, under the porte-cochere. He looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock. He turned back and put his hand on Nancy Jo's shoulder.

When she awakened her eyes opened wide and there was a staring look of surprise and for a moment no flicker of recognition.

"Do you know it's morning?" Cobb said.

She sat up, still looking at his face.

"It's morning and my car is out there in the drive," Cobb said. "What time does Ralph get up?"

"About seven-thirty."

"Then I just got time." He leaned over and kissed her. "Nancy Jo, you sure are a sweet one. Honey, I wish things were different."

"It's all right. You don't have to make anything up. I told you that before."

"Well—I got to go."

"Yes."

"So long."

He went quickly to the door, and did not look back.

When he released the handbrake the car coasted backward down the slope and he guided it out of the driveway onto Sycamore Street. Then he started the engine and drove to the Lebanon House. He would go to the barber shop for a shave, he thought, and then he'd have breakfast and after that he'd feel better. For sure, he'd feel better.

When he entered the lobby the clerk signaled to him and passed two notes across the desk. One was from Hal Carr and said: *Come see me in Saint Louis some time.* Cobb grinned and glanced at the other. It was a slip of blue paper

on which it was noted that Arthur Shaw had called him the evening before. Cobb knew what had happened. The streak of brown in the field of volunteer oats, leading like a cow-path to the topping plant. It was hard to miss. He went to the barber shop and was shaved, and sat in the Alamo Café over a cup of coffee until it was eight o'clock, then he put through a call to the proration headquarters in Devant. A nasal female voice informed him that Mr. Shaw was in the field. Where? At the Cobb Walters lease. Cobb slammed the receiver on the hook and ran out to his car.

When he reached the lease Cobb found the umpire standing by a hole in the ground. They had dug down and they had found the by-pass. Arthur Shaw looked at Cobb with a cold smile. "Very clever, Mr. Walters. The left-handed handwheel is very clever indeed. I suppose the pipe runs to that refinery?"

Cobb nodded glumly.

"We're digging it up, and I might as well inform you, Mr. Walters, that I intend to file a complaint with the attorney general and ask that a penalty suit be brought against you."

Cobb smiled sourly. "Okay, what's one more suit."

"And I might add that the owners of this land will be interested in this by-pass," Arthur Shaw said. "They'll be interested to know how much oil you sold and how much royalty they should have received."

"I don't happen to be a thief," Cobb said. "I've paid royalties on every drop of oil I sold."

"I'm glad to hear that. Some of them don't, particularly over in East Texas."

"I'd like to know whose sharp eyes it was in this case," Cobb said. "Who made the complaint?"

The umpire shrugged his shoulders and Cobb turned back to his car. He drove to Lebanon and went at once to see Ardmore Devant. The wrinkles of Ardmore's neck settled into concentric lines and the puckers around his eyes

were turned up slightly. He gave Cobb the impression that he was enjoying the interview, and Cobb was irritated.

"Cobb, this bank has a rule of long standing," Ardmore said. "It's the guiding principle, which my father laid down. You see, we have the interests of our customers at heart, and not any one customer, but all the customers."

Cobb nodded, and Ardmore pressed his fingertips together and smiled faintly. "This is a county seat bank, and we serve the entire county. Not only the merchants of Lebanon, but the farmers throughout the county. They come to us for loans and we advance the money that helps them buy their seed and feed and clothe their families and carries them over until they make a crop. They depend on this bank, and naturally we depend on their good will."

"Yes," Cobb said. "But . . ."

"So we expect every man to pay up his loan promptly. After all, there's only so much money. You might say that this county has a nest egg, here in this bank, and every man is entitled to his share of it. He's entitled to his right to borrow the money when he needs it, upon the tender of good security, and if we extend loans, particularly large loans, then that money is not available for the small borrower. And if it is not available this bank is not fulfilling its function and keeps bad faith with its clients. You see?"

"I see," Cobb said. "I see you don't want to give me an extension."

"Can't is the word, Cobb. We really can't. As I told you, that is the standing rule of this bank and we don't make exceptions."

Ardmore got to his feet and walked to the window. He stood for a moment looking out at the square, then he said over his shoulder, "Cobb, you know that of course I want to help you all I can. For Jan's sake, too. But frankly, I'm worried. I'm considerably worried."

"I'll get the money," Cobb said.

"I hope you do."

The words sounded ominous, and Cobb frowned. Ardmore faced him. "Cobb, we're pretty much concerned about the collateral on that loan. I let my own judgment be affected by personal considerations, and as you know, I personally advanced fifty thousand dollars. But at that time I did not know the manner in which you acquired those leases."

"I won them in a fair game," Cobb said shortly.

"Yes, I know." Ardmore sat down again. "Now the loan we made to the Cobb Walters Oil Company is all right. Whatever the decision of the court, that loan was made in good faith and the obligation will be met. But the loan we made to you personally is secured by your stock in the company, and if the decision goes against you that stock is worthless, Cobb, absolutely worthless."

"I'm going to win that suit."

"I hope so. I certainly hope so. I wish Judge Hatcher would hand down a decision." Ardmore shook his head slightly. "At any rate, it ought to be quite clear why we don't care to extend your loan, Cobb. In fact, we want to write that loan off the books as quickly as we can."

"It ain't due for a couple of weeks," Cobb said. "Don't you worry, I'll be around with the money. And whether I win that suit or not, Mr. Devant, you'll get paid in full. If it comes to that I can sell my lease. I can sell my stock in the Nancy Hanks. I can pay off that loan."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Cobb."

"But it ain't going to come to that," Cobb said. "I'm going to win that suit."

Ardmore shrugged his shoulders. "I wish I felt as confident as you do, but some of that testimony was very damaging, Cobb. Of course, I believe your story, but still . . ."

Cobb picked up his hat and left the bank. On the street he looked up and saw the windows of the Cobb Walters Oil Company, and the letters in gold. It had been a month

since the trial, and still there was no decision. The only news was one hundred and eight pounds of fish, caught in a single day.

Cobb walked on around the square to the limestone building of the City Bank. Oil had done much for the two banks of Lebanon, each of which had branch offices in Devant from which armed trucks brought the deposits each night to Lebanon. To make a deposit, to withdraw funds, a customer must stand in line for at least half an hour, and there were long lines leading to the tellers' windows. As the money was deposited the teller tied a string around it, tagged it with the name of the depositor, and tossed it into a wire wastebasket, to be counted and credited after the bank's doors closed for the day. There was no time to verify deposit slips.

Cobb passed behind the lines, close to the wall, and went into the office of the president of the City Bank. Harvey Fleming always had a joke to tell. Perhaps he had kidded the barber that morning about his winnings in a dice game while the barber was shaving the minister of his church, and he would tell about it. Perhaps he had substituted a trick golf ball for Dick McWilliams, a Scotchman who planned his game as if it were chess on the cow pasture golf links west of town, where the greens were of oiled sand and they played winter rules the year round because the ground was always baked harder than it ever froze and the grass grew tall as weeds. But if Harvey Fleming had infantile impulses they were not apparent in his person. He was tall and thin, and his white hair was close-cropped and cut in bangs across his forehead, in token of his admiration for Elihu Root.

Even in the boom days in Lebanon Harvey Fleming took time to chat, and Cobb listened to the inevitable anecdote before he was able to state his business.

"I want to negotiate a small loan, Mr. Fleming," he said. "I suppose you know I've been doing business with the

Lebanon National and you're wondering why I've come to you. The fact is that when I've fulfilled my obligations at the National I intend to transfer my account here, and that of the Cobb Walters Oil Company as well."

"Glad to be of service to you, Cobb," Harvey Fleming said. "By the way, what do you hear about that suit?"

"No decision yet."

Harvey pursed his lips and nodded.

"But I'm going to win it," Cobb said. "Harvey, I want to borrow about twenty-five thousand dollars."

Harvey raised his white eyebrows. "What collateral are you offering, Cobb?"

"I've got a block of stock in the Lebanon and County Railroad."

"How many shares, Cobb?"

"It's about a thirty per cent interest."

Harvey Fleming shook his head slightly. "Twenty-five thousand is a pretty good sum. I know the old Nancy Hanks had been doing pretty good business, but there's not much oil shipped by rail, Cobb. Not since proration."

"Last week sixty-two carloads were freighted into Lebanon and Devant," Cobb said. "There were twenty carloads of steel, ten of pipe, eight of lumber, four of cement and twenty of general merchandise. That railroad don't depend on oil."

Harvey picked up a pencil, inspected the point, scribbled on a pad of yellow paper. "I'll have to look into it, Cobb. Give me a little time."

"Sure, but I want the money pretty soon."

Harvey nodded. "Suppose you come in next week."

When he left the City Bank Cobb felt better. Let them dig up my pipes, he thought. The Lord's Adopted well makes no difference to me. It's only ten acres and I got sixteen hundred acres of the best leases in the field, as soon as I get control again. And when I do . . .

A voice called his name and Cobb turned. He had passed

the office of the *Lebanon News* and saw Ed Drum in the doorway. He turned slowly back.

"I thought you'd be interested," Ed said. "We just got it from the AP that a Federal court threw proration out the window."

Cobb sucked his underlip. "That umpire just finished digging up my pipeline. Just today. Now that's a hell of a thing. So proration's out, Ed?"

"It seems so. There was a three-judge Federal court sitting in Austin and they heard a suit brought by some East Texas operator. They held that the proration orders of the Railroad Commission were usurpations of power not delegated to the commission."

"I knew it would come," Cobb said. "I knew they couldn't get away with it."

Ed licked his lips. "I wouldn't get over-optimistic, if I were you, Cobb. The Legislature is in special session and they'll adopt a law with teeth in it. They'll make you people toe the line. The days when one greedy man can upset the economy of a whole oil field are gone."

"Maybe," Cobb said indifferently.

He walked on to the Lebanon House. As usual there were men on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, and Cobb noticed quick glances in his direction. He went into the hotel, and as usual the lobby was crowded. He walked toward the stairway at the back, by the clerk's cubbyhole, and when he had nearly reached the stairs he heard the noise. He frowned and turned around.

It was an ominous, sibilant sound. In the crowded, smoky lobby of the hotel men were hissing. It was a group of a dozen men near the steps and they were looking at Cobb, and hissing. Blood pounded in his head. He clenched his fists and took a step forward, but the hissing did not stop.

"So they caught you at last, Walters?" a man shouted.

Cobb recognized the man. He had a small lease and a small well, and Cobb remembered that the well was on the

pump. His face was flushed as he looked at the close group of men. He smiled bitterly.

"You heard the news, didn't you?" he said. "They threw proration out. The Federal court threw it out."

He turned and went upstairs to his rooms.

31

COBB thought that after they were married it would not be like this. They would have their own house, he and Jan, and there would not be this forced manner that was in all of them as he sat with Jan and Pruitt on the veranda of the Devant ranchhouse after dinner. Jan wore a white dress and sat in a white iron porch chair with a red scarf held lightly in her fingers. Behind her the lights of Ragtown showed clear and bright on the prairie, and the points of light of the drilling rigs were seen on the distant slope against the glowing evening sky.

They had finished their coffee and Pruitt and Cobb were smoking. Pruitt sat far back in his chair, his full lips faintly smiling. There was a silence and Jan glanced at Cobb and twisted the red scarf in her fingers. "Any news yet, Cobb?" she asked.

"About the suit? No.—But you know what the talk is now? The talk is they're going to have martial law in the oil fields to enforce proration. Like they done in Oklahoma. I guess you know about that?"

"I saw something in the newspaper."

"They said he couldn't do it, but he did. He declared martial law in the twenty-seven prorated oil fields of Oklahoma and sent troops to close down three thousand wells. They claimed it was unconstitutional, but that old Governor said he helped to write the constitution of the state and knew what he was doing, and I guess he does. Those wells will stay shut down until the price goes up to a dollar a barrel. A buck or nothing is what he said."

"But it doesn't affect us here, does it?" Jan asked.

"Nobody knows what will happen. They're talking about shutting down those big flush wells in East Texas now. There's a movement out there in favor of martial law. They're going to have a mass meeting in Tyler to take a vote on whether to ask the Governor to send in troops. But it's a funny thing." Cobb chuckled. "In the meantime they're shipping East Texas crude by tank car to Oklahoma refineries that lost their supply because of the shut-down."

An east wind cooled the August night and brought from far in the pasture, by the stock tanks, the rumbling of a bull. Jan sighed. "Cobb, I heard about what happened the other night. You haven't let it worry you, have you? They just don't understand."

Cobb sat upright. "What happened the other night? You heard what?"

"About the hissing, I mean."

"Oh."

"They don't understand that you simply *had* to sell your oil. That was it, wasn't it? It was important to you to sell it, wasn't it?"

"You bet it was. But where did you hear about it?"

Jan hesitated and glanced at the glow of her brother's cigarette. Pruitt's smile became more definite. "It's all over town, Cobb," he said.

"Yes, I guess it is."

"Never mind," Jan said. "It will work out all right. I know it will. You'll win your suit, Cobb."

"I believe so," Cobb said, and glanced at Pruitt. "Jan, I want to talk to you a minute. Do you mind, Pruitt?"

Pruitt nodded and left the veranda. Cobb moved toward Jan, and she stood up. "Listen, we've been bottled up too much," he said. "Jan, I have things to say and I never get a chance to say them. But it's just a little while now. As soon as I win that suit we're going to get married. We've waited long enough."

Jan turned aside, crumpling the scarf in her hands. "Don't you think we might as well put it off until fall, Cobb?"

"No, I don't."

She stood looking at the lights of Ragtown. "When the cool weather comes, Cobb. After all, I didn't get a summer trousseau. I outfitted for winter at first, and then for spring." She laughed nervously.

"I know. It's my fault, Jan. But it couldn't be helped."

"No, but perhaps it was a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"Waiting so long, I mean."

Cobb put his hands on her shoulders. "Jan, you feel the *same*, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. I suppose so. Of course I do." She moved aside, and her smile seemed remote to Cobb. Her brown eyes had an expression of restraint. She said quietly, "Darling, I have rather a headache tonight. I went riding in the heat of the day."

"Yes, I'll go. Look here, Jan, let's you and me get away tomorrow night. Let's go out and have us a time."

She shook her head. "Father is having some people to dinner and he'll want me here.—But if you want to stop by later?"

"I'll do that," Cobb said.

Pruitt was standing in the ranch yard, under a pecan tree, when Cobb went out to his car. He called to Cobb softly and came forward out of the shadows. "Cobb, I've been thinking it over."

"Thinking what over?"

"Well, I think you and I ought to bury the hatchet."

Cobb looked into Pruitt's eyes, as dark as Jan's. He nodded. "That's all right with me."

"It's about time, I guess," Pruitt said. "After all, it looks like I'm going to be your brother-in-law and I think we both ought to make the best of it."

"I don't know why it was we never did get along," Cobb said. "Do you?"

"Maybe it's because we never tried."

"Maybe," Cobb said. "Well . . ." He put out his hand. As they shook hands Pruitt's full lips were smiling. "It's a bargain, then. How about we seal it?"

"Sure."

"It's early yet. Suppose we take a ride down to Ragtown?"

Cobb shook his head. "I don't think so. I'm better off staying out of that town."

"I don't care. Whatever you say. But Ragtown fascinates me, and besides, I have a sort of interest in it. It bears my name."

"So it does," Cobb said. "All right, we'll go to Ragtown if you want. But look here, I'm on the wagon. I don't want to make a night of it."

"No, just for a quick one."

They got in Cobb's car and he drove down the hill and across the ford at Fossil Creek. For a while they watched the headlights pick out the sunflowers along the road, then Pruitt said, "Cobb, speaking as a brother-in-law, do you want some gratuitous advice?"

"I ain't sure that I do," Cobb said.

"I said it was gratuitous.—You ought to pay more attention to Jan. She needs warmth around her."

"Keep your nose out of it," Cobb said.

Pruitt laughed. "I expected it would irritate you, but I thought we were burying the hatchet."

"I'm kind of jumpy tonight," Cobb said. "I'm sorry." But he still was frowning, thinking it was strange that Pruitt should so abruptly make advances, thinking that he had never trusted Pruitt.

They reached Ragtown, and Cobb found a place to park in the mud of Ranger Street. They went into a saloon for a drink. Beyond the bar was a railing enclosing four pool

tables that still did duty as beds in Ragtown. The rates for pool were sixty cents an hour, but after closing time the tables were available at two dollars for the night, or at the rate of twenty-five cents an hour.

The liquor was raw and yellow and the only way to drink it was in one quick gulp. The taste came crude and bitter after breath was expelled. Cobb said, "Whoo!" and then he said, "If you distilled gasoline as bad as they distill this whisky it would stall your car. Ain't it awful?"

"Let's have another," Pruitt said. "Let's get this taste out of our mouths."

They had another round, and Cobb began to feel a friendly warmth for Pruitt, for his brother-in-law to be. He touched Pruitt's shoulder. "Boy, let me tell you something. I'm going to be refining gasoline one of these days. This whisky makes me think of it. But the gas I refine will make your auto purr. It will be the best damned gasoline you ever saw. Cobbco gas."

They had a drink to Cobbco gas.

"The kind of engine I got, it will purr on this stuff," Pruitt said. "Boy, I'm in high gear. Listen here, Cobb, let's look the town over."

"Okay," Cobb said.

They went out into the shoving crowd on the boardwalk. Pruitt pointed toward Hogshooter Street. "Did you ever go in that place?"

"What place?"

"Ruby's White Way."

"No," Cobb said.

"Let's look it over."

"That's not much of a place to go, from all I hear."

"I'd like to see it, though."

Cobb glanced at Pruitt. The full lips still were smiling. "If you want," Cobb said.

They walked along Ranger to Hogshooter Street, where the girls were out. Women called down from the windows;

they stood in doorways along Hogshooter Street. They strolled on the boardwalk in silk dresses, low-cut, and their feet were in cowboy half-boots, because of the mud. These were by-products of oil; squat women with generous hips and loins, the rouge on their faces a feverish stain.

Ruby's White Way was crowded and the orchestra was playing the "St. Louis Blues," a song that Cobb had heard on the Line in Borger, on Bishop's Alley in Seminole; a plush parlor rhapsody.

They pushed their way to the bar and ordered drinks, and they no longer noticed the bitter taste. Cobb swayed away from the bar, caught sight of blonde hair, and shouted, "Hiya, blondie." The girl turned, unsmiling.

"Take off those overalls," Cobb said. "Let's us dance."

She glanced at his tailored clothes, nodded, and pushed the overall straps from her shoulders. She was wearing a green dress trimmed in black, and green slippers. The skirt was short and was rumpled from the overalls. She hung the overalls on a hook and said, "It's two-bits."

Cobb gave her a five-dollar bill and this time she smiled. Cobb grinned at Pruitt. "Get a bottle and a table, brother-in-law, we're going to dance."

They pushed out on the dance floor and Cobb realized that he was tight. He staggered and bumped against other couples, and a driller in greasy overalls gave him an angry look, then recognized him and laughed. "Stay in there, Mr. Walters."

The girl raised her head. "Your name Walters?"

"That's right. Cobb Walters."

"Not *the* Cobb Walters. Well, say!"

Cobb was pleased and grinned foolishly.

"You can call me Sue," she said. She guided him out of the crowd. "Maybe you want to sit down a minute."

"Maybe I want another drink," Cobb said. "Let's go."

They found Pruitt at a table with a bottle in front of him

and a tranquil smile on his face as he looked at the nude of a blonde girl painted on the wall behind the bar.

"This is Sue," Cobb said.

"Sure, I recognize her." Pruitt smiled. "Don't you?"

Cobb looked at the mural. "By God it is." He stared at the girl. "Say, she's blushing."

"I tell you why," Pruitt said. "It's because of that mole. See it? What's a girl got left if everybody knows she's got a mole on her tummy?"

Cobb put out his arm and gave the girl a great hug. "You're kind of cute. How about we have a little drink?"

She drew back and smoothed her hair. "Now be a sweet boy, Mr. Walters."

"My name is Cobb."

"Well, be nice."

Pruitt poured the drinks and Cobb reached for his. "I'm blowing off steam tonight," he said. "I got a big head of steam, and boy, I'm blowing it off. Listen to my whistle."

"Be nice, Mr. Walters," Sue said.

"Let him holler," said Pruitt. "I'll tell you something about this guy. If he can't make a big noise he doesn't know he's having any fun. If he shows everybody else he's having a hell of a time he'll begin to believe it himself and then he can enjoy himself. You see, he's one of these guys without a sense of humor."

"The hell you say." Cobb was indignant. "You know damn well I got a sense of humor."

"You see, he's anti-social," Pruitt went on. "He doesn't like people. He doesn't give a damn for 'em, so he has to whoop and holler and make a good time for himself because he's the kind of little boy the other little boys don't play with much. That's why he wants to be a big shot."

"You're looking for a poke on the snout," Cobb said.

"You go on, Pruitt, and you're going to get it."

Pruitt smiled. "See, he's got to put a label on everything. If something happens he doesn't like he looks at his reme-

dies and he finds a label and it says poke on the snout."

"You be nice, too, Mister," Sue said. "Ruby will blame me if there's any trouble."

"I'd like to get a look at Ruby," Cobb said. "Where is she?" He stood up. "Hey, Ruby!"

Ruby came over, frowning. But when she reached the table she put on her burlesque circuit smile.

"Ruby, sit down," Pruitt said. "I want you to know my friend, Cobb Walters. *The Cobb Walters*. Why don't you sit down and buy us a drink?"

Ruby sat down and Cobb said, "I'm buying the drinks."

"Did you boys bring in a well or something?" Ruby asked.

"I brought in an oil field," Cobb said. "Ain't you heard of me? I'm Cobb Walters."

Pruitt laughed. "The guy who discovers a field is soon forgotten. Bet you can't tell me who discovered Ranger."

"Fellow named Gordon."

"And Burkburnett?"

"Farmer named Fowler."

"And how about Seminole?"

"The hell with that. I got a passing mark, didn't I?" Cobb took the bottle from the waiter, tossed him a bill, and filled the glasses. "Why, hell, Ruby," he said. "I set you up in business. Sue, I'm your meal ticket."

"Let's have a drink to our benefactor," Pruitt said. "Cobb Walters, the servant of mankind."

Cobb was slouched over the table, his chin leaning on his fist. He looked at Sue and gave her a wink that twisted his face to one side. Then he reached out and grabbed her roughly. She pushed him away. "Now be nice, Mr. Walters."

"Damn it," Cobb said. "What's the matter with me?" His fingers closed tightly on her arm, pinching the flesh, and she cried out.

"Now cut it out," Ruby said sharply.

Sue got to her feet and said with droning politeness, "Excuse me, please." She walked away.

"What do you know about that?" Cobb said. "And I gave her five bucks. She better not dance with anybody else."

"Cobb, I'll tell you why," Pruitt said. "Every girl you meet you treat like she was a tart, and some of 'em don't mind it because they confuse brutality with virility. But you can't treat a tart like a tart, Cobb."

"I don't like that kind of talk," Ruby said angrily.

Cobb got to his feet, pushing the table away from him. He stumbled forward and as Pruitt got up from his chair Cobb hit him. Pruitt fell over backwards, over the chair, and then there was shouting and confusion and two men in greasy overalls came running over with strange smiles on their faces and Cobb's shoulder was jarred by a blow. He put up his hands and someone hit him in the abdomen and he doubled up and then there was a crashing blow on the side of his head and he fell forward on his face.

There was a period of consciousness when he was aware of a sharp pain in his head that was an overtone of a dull and steady ache. He tried to open his eyes and could not, and he breathed heavily through his mouth and consciousness slipped away from him and he thought that he was falling, falling, and that if he did not co-ordinate his muscles and jerk himself upright his being would fall entirely out of his body, but he could not and he let himself fall and then with a sharp ache he returned to his body.

He opened his eyes and it was daylight. There was a cold towel on his head and he lay on a soft bed and there was a strong smell of perfume. He lay looking up at the ceiling where there was a crack that was shaped like an oyster. The wallpaper was a dark red and there was a mirror with a gilt frame and on the wall was a tinted picture of the madonna and child. He heard the door open and the blonde girl came in and looked down at him. She

was wearing a kimono and her hair was pinned up in a knot on top of her head. The paint had been wiped off and she seemed a plain girl, but more attractive, Cobb thought, than she had the night before. He sat up and his head throbbed. He closed his eyes.

Sue laughed softly. "You had it coming to you."

He kept his eyes closed. "I guess I did. What happened?"

"You were spoiling for a fight and there was a couple of drillers spoiling for a fight, too. You come together."

"I can believe that." Cobb opened his eyes again. "I didn't even get in a lick. Did I get in a lick?"

"You hit your friend."

"Oh—yes. I'm sorry about that. Where is he?"

"He went home in a rent car last night."

Cobb swung his feet over the edge of the bed and saw that he was fully dressed, except for his shoes. He found them on the floor. "How did I get up here?"

"Ruby didn't want you to go to jail. You know what that jail is like?"

"No, I don't. Do you?"

She smiled. "I've been there."

Cobb nodded. "Thanks for taking care of me. You're a good sport, Sue."

"If it had been me you'd be in jail right now, chained to one of those posts. It was Ruby."

"Spoke like a man," Cobb said. He felt in his pocket, and his wallet was there. He took it out and opened it and Sue said angrily, "Don't worry. Nobody touched it."

"Hey," Cobb said, "I'm not as big a heel as you think I am. I just wanted to make it right." He took out two ten-dollar bills. "Here, Sue, put this in your stocking. You're okay."

She took the money, folded it. "Well—thanks."

Cobb tied his shoe laces and stood up. "Have I still got a hat?"

"Hanging behind the door."

He put it on and smiled. "No hard feelings?"

"Sure not. Come back again."

"I'll do that."

Cobb followed a dim corridor to the stairs. He went down to the barroom, where an old Negro woman was mopping the floor. The nudes behind the bar looked particularly obscene in that morning light, and the old woman did not once glance up from the floor.

Cobb came out into the sunlight and Hogshooter Street looked very drab. His head ached miserably, and he held his eyes half-closed against the sunlight. He turned the corner into Ranger Street and found his yellow car at the curb in front of the saloon.

Cobb drove back to Lebanon. It was nearly eleven o'clock and all he wanted was to go to his room and tie his head up in a towel and go to sleep. But first he had to see Harvey Fleming at the City Bank. It was Saturday, the fifteenth of August.

He was admitted at once to Harvey Fleming's office, and he listened with a wan smile to the inevitable joke that prefaced every interview with Harvey. Then the president of the City Bank came to the point. "We've gone into it pretty thoroughly, Cobb, and we feel that fifteen thousand is about the limit on that collateral."

"I need twenty-five thousand," Cobb said.

Harvey shook his head. "We'd have to have more collateral than the Nancy Hanks stock. Frankly, Cobb, my feeling is that fifteen thousand may be stretching it somewhat. The whole situation is so uncertain, and that railroad has an experience of failure."

Cobb nodded. "I'll take the fifteen thousand then. Where do I sign?"

On the street again his eyes were half-closed against the summer sun. He had about nine thousand dollars in the Lebanon National Bank, realized from the sale of oil, and fifteen thousand in the City Bank. He was seven thousand

short, but he did not particularly care. Let Ardmore whistle for his money, he thought. Let him whistle. I'll take care of it on Monday and if I have to I can get back some of the ten thousand I gave to Dad. Right now I got to have a hot bath and do something to keep my head from splitting open like a mushmelon over-ripe.

Cobb dragged his way up the stairs and threw himself down on the bed and pressed his head into the pillow, and when he awakened the light was failing and he felt better. He got up and found a bottle with a small amount of whisky in it. He sat by the window and drank out of the bottle and the warm liquor bathed his mouth and throat and absorbed the dryness there and suffused his head with warmth and when the bottle was empty he realized that the hangover was gone. He went down to the hotel barber shop and was shaved and had hot towels applied until the skin of his face felt raw.

He walked to the north side of the square, past the Lebanon National Bank and the five and ten cent store and the Cobb Walters Oil Company and the hardware store to the building on the corner where Ned Barstow had operated a drug store. There was a side door and he knocked, and was admitted to a gloomy room where there was a bar of pine boards. He had three more drinks and then he was hungry and returned to the square.

As he passed beneath the windows of the Cobb Walters Oil Company he heard his name called and glanced up and saw Nancy Jo Paige waving to him. He waited and she came running down the stairs. "Cobb, did you hear the news? You won!"

Cobb tried to bring his thoughts to focus and she caught his arm. "Why, you're drunk. Cobb, you're stinking!"

He grinned at her.

"But listen, crazy. Get it through your head. The decision was handed down today and you won the suit. The

Cobb Walters Oil Company is yours again. Don't you understand?"

"It's a funny thing," Cobb said. "I ought to whoop and holler but all I feel is just kind of satisfied. I guess I never had a doubt I'd win that suit."

"What you need now is some black coffee," Nancy Jo said. She tucked her hand under his arm and led him to the Alamo Café. When they were at a table in a corner Cobb ate a huge steak and drank four cups of coffee and as he sobered a light came into his eyes and he pinched Nancy Jo's knee under the table and said, "Honey, now we're going to town. Now we're going to build that company up and we're going to install a refinery and the first thing you know we'll be selling Cobbco gas."

"Maybe you'd better wait until the situation clears up a little, Cobb," Nancy Jo said. "You'd better wait to see what the Legislature does and what happens to the price of oil."

"The price will go up, proration or no proration," Cobb said. "It's bound to. And as for proration, I guess we're going to have it and there's nothing we can do about it."

"So you've made up your mind to that at last?"

Cobb smiled. "Maybe.—Nancy Jo, how would you like to take a trip over to Ragtown?"

"You told me not to go there any more."

"Except with me," Cobb said. "Come on, I want to see Jesse Halliday."

She sucked in her breath. "Now wait up a minute, Cobb."

"Just a friendly visit," Cobb said. "Honey, I'm the friend of all mankind tonight. There ain't no rancor in my soul."

They drove to Devant and Cobb stopped the car in front of the corner building where the gambling room was. "This is a laugh," he said. "I want to see the look on that bastard's face. What I ought to do is I ought to wring his neck, but I ain't. Don't worry. I ain't."

Inside the gambling hall, Cobb took her arm and guided her toward Halliday's office in the rear. The door was open and Jesse was seated at his desk, reading a newspaper.

"You got company," Cobb said.

Jesse looked up with a start and put the newspaper down. He got slowly to his feet.

"I guess you heard the news, friend," Cobb said. "The court threw your suit out."

There was an alert expression in Jesse's eyes as he studied Cobb's face. He smiled faintly and said, "I ain't surprised."

"You ain't?"

"I didn't much think I'd win it. Did you?"

"That's a cool way to put it," Cobb said. "You got up there on the stand and filled Judge Hatcher's ears full of lies and then you say you hadn't expected to win. Sort of a gag, was it?"

Jesse shook his head. "I wouldn't say that."

Cobb frowned. "I don't get it. What did you want to do? Scare me?—Well, if it was revenge you was after you gave me a scare, all right. I'll hand you that."

"No hard feelings, though?"

Cobb shook his head. "I guess not. It's all over now."

"I thought I had a good case, but hell, the judge thought different, so that's that. What do you say we have a drink on it?"

"You bet," Nancy Jo said quickly, with an anxious glance at Cobb. "Let's have a drink on it."

Jesse Halliday produced a bottle from a drawer of his desk, and three rather sticky glasses. He poured the drinks. Cobb picked up his glass, hesitated, and shook his head slightly. Then he drank.

"Come on, Cobb," Nancy Jo said. "Let's play roulette."

"All right." He looked steadily at Halliday for a moment, then followed Nancy Jo to the roulette table. "I don't get it," he said again. "Nancy Jo, what do you think?"

"I think it's all water over the dam, darling."

"Yes, but still— What was behind it?"

"Cobb, buy me some chips. I'll have to owe you."

He bought five hundred dollars' worth of chips and gave Nancy Jo half. She raised her eyebrows. "You feel like plunging tonight?"

"You bet I do. My luck has turned."

Nancy Jo played the odd and even, but Cobb bet the numbers in the middle. He lost, and went to buy more chips, but he had little money and asked to cash a check. Jesse Halliday came over, smiling, and said, "Give him all he wants."

"I'll write you a check when I'm done," Cobb said. He walked back to the roulette table, puzzled, and he said again, "I just don't get it."

Cobb could not win. He doubled his bets, and lost, and when they quit playing he owed a thousand dollars. He wrote a check on the City Bank.

As they came out on Ranger Street Nancy Jo asked, "Cobb, how much did we lose?"

"Never mind."

"But it was a lot, wasn't it?"

"Fifteen hundred, altogether. But what the hell, we're rich again."

Nancy Jo whistled. "Fifteen hundred dollars. Cobb, I guess I'm bad luck for you."

"The hell you are. You're the sweetest little luckpiece I ever had."

There was a bottle in the dashboard compartment, and they drank from it as they returned to Lebanon. "You got a new boss Monday," Cobb said exultantly. "Yes, sir, I'll be back on the job Monday."

"Cobb," Nancy Jo said quietly. "I'm going to quit."

"Oh, no." Cobb found her hand. "I need you there, honey."

"I stayed on during the receivership to help you out,

Cobb, to keep an eye on things for you. I would have quit before."

"Of course I know there's no reason for you to work," he said glumly. "You're on the way to being a rich woman, but still . . ."

He turned into the public square and off on a side street. He stopped at the curb beside the side entrance to the Lebanon House. He took another drink from the bottle, and Nancy Jo sat very still.

"Will you take me on home?" she said at last.

"Home? What for?" He put his arm around her.

"Cobb, I know I asked for it." Her voice was low. "I know I bounced at you like a rubber ball, but I can't any more. I'm in too deep and it just isn't any good any more. Cobb, will you please take me home?"

He took his arm away and gripped the steering wheel with both hands. "I'm drunk," he said. He shook his head and started the engine. "Nancy Jo, I know I'm pretty damn self-centered and selfish. I've been sort of a heel. Yes, I guess brutal is the word, all right."

"Brutal?" She touched his hand lightly. "Of course not. You're, well, kind of rugged, but underneath you're sweet, Cobb. I know that." Her voice dropped lower. "And besides, I'm in love with you. You've known that all along, haven't you?"

Cobb put the car in gear and drove slowly away from the hotel.

32

WHEN he awoke the next morning Cobb's first thought was, how long has this been going on? Is it two days? Three days? He tried to think, and he had confused impressions of Ruby's White Way and Sue. He remembered hitting Pruitt and the fight, and he remembered Jesse Halliday the night before. Then he remembered when he and Pruitt had started out for Ragtown from the Devant ranch and that had been Friday, and wasn't this Sunday? And he remembered telling Jan that he would come around after dinner on Saturday. He groaned and reached for the telephone.

Jan answered the call, recognized his voice, and said, "Where in heaven's name have you been?"

"I tell you, Jan," Cobb said. "I went out celebrating and I got caught drunk."

"I tried to get you all yesterday afternoon, and last night."

"Yes, I wasn't home.—Look here, Jan, I won that suit. Did you hear?"

"Father told me."

"Oh. Look, Jan, that makes it all right now. We're all set now. Honey, when can I see you?"

"Well, I'm here."

"I'll be around," Cobb said. "No, wait. I've got a little business to attend to. But I'll come around this afternoon."

"Very well," she said in a tone of patience, and hung up.

Cobb went to shave and now he remembered a good deal. He remembered that he had lost fifteen hundred dol-

lars the night before in Ragtown. He remembered that he needed thirty-one thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars to pay off a note now over-due, and that there had been only about twenty-four thousand in the bank before he made out the check to cover his gambling losses. He needed eight or nine thousand dollars, and he thought of the ten thousand that he had made over to his father. He dropped the razor and went to the telephone.

When he heard his father's voice he said, "Dad, this is Cobb."

"You bet," Tom Walters said. "Say, your Maw wants to know will you come to Sunday dinner?"

"Today I'm busy," Cobb said. "I'm sorry. Listen, Dad, I need a little money for a couple of days. Say eight thousand dollars."

"Eight thousand dollars?" Tom Walters chuckled. "Son, I ain't got it, if that's what you mean."

"But I gave you . . . I mean I thought . . ."

"We spent that money, Cobb, your Maw and me. We didn't think you'd mind, and . . ."

"Of course I don't mind," Cobb said quickly. "That's what it was for. Anyhow, I just needed some cash for a couple of days, but I can get it. Never mind."

"You sure everything is all right, Cobb?"

"You bet it is. Didn't you hear I won that suit?"

"I heard that, but I didn't know for sure. It didn't come from you."

"It's true," Cobb said, and added quickly, "I'll try and get around to see you and Mom later. Right now I'm pretty busy."

"That's all right, son. I'm sorry about that money."

"Don't give it a thought. I'm glad you got some good out of it."

Cobb hung up the receiver and sat down on the edge of the bed, thinking, Christ, how did they go through ten grand? He saw his reflection in the mirror and went to

finish shaving. His only asset now was the Lord's Adopted well, and if he could make a quick sale he would have more than enough to pay off the note. He had to sell it.

A leaseman of the Trading Post Oil Company lived in the Lebanon House, and Cobb got him on the house phone. Yes, he could spare a minute. In the coffee shop downstairs, then.

His name was Leon Temple, and he had been a rich man once. But there was a dry hole for every gray hair he had, and it was ten years since he had struck it rich at Burkburnett. They sat at the counter and drank coffee and Cobb said, "I have a well on that Lord's Adopted tract making two thousand barrels and it offsets a lease that belongs to the Trading Post Oil Company on the west."

"Sure, I know your property."

"Well, I'm willing to sell it, if the Tropoco is interested."

Leon Temple raised his eyebrows slightly. "What are you asking for it?"

"It's a ten-acre tract, and . . ."

"Only ten acres?"

"And a two-thousand-barrel well," Cobb said. "Now, I'm no engineer, but I know something about setting a value on a tract of oil land, and I thought we could work it out. That sand is figured at about a hundred feet and the porosity is twenty-five per cent." He reached for a paper napkin and scribbled on it with a soft pencil. "A cubic foot comes to seven point five gallons, so the oil in a cubic foot of sand of twenty-five per cent porosity works out to one point eight seven five gallons. Right?"

Leon Temple glanced at the figures on the paper napkin and methodically checked them.

"All right," Cobb said. "Now we multiply that by forty-three thousand, five hundred and sixty feet for an acre and we get eighty-one thousand six hundred and seventy-five gallons. Right?"

"Let's have another cup of coffee," Leon Temple said.

Cobb stirred his second cup, then pulled the napkin toward him. "So to get the amount in barrels we divide by forty-two and it comes to nineteen hundred and forty-four barrels an acre foot. We'll skip the fractions."

"I'd just as soon skip the figures," Leon Temple said. "What do you want for that lease?"

"I'm pretty near finished. Now we multiply that by a hundred for the thickness of the sand and we get the estimated amount of oil per acre and it's a hundred and ninety-four thousand, four hundred barrels. So for ten acres it's one million, nine hundred and forty-four thousand barrels."

"And how much of that oil do you figure you'll bring up?" asked Leon Temple.

"Anyhow fifty per cent."

"More like fifteen per cent. And how much will it cost to produce each barrel of oil, and what's the price going to be? You've got to take all those factors into consideration."

"Suppose we set the ultimate recovery as low as thirty per cent," Cobb said. "That's five hundred and eighty-three thousand, two hundred barrels of oil. Call it six hundred thousand."

"Why not call it five hundred and eighty-three thousand et cetera?" Leon Temple grinned. "Now suppose we concede thirty per cent recovery, how long do you think that well will flow? Maybe six months, maybe a year, more if proration sticks, probably. There's your decline ratio to take into account. You're going to produce less and less oil and as time goes on it's going to cost more and more per barrel to produce it. And how about price? Right now it's hard enough to get twenty cents a barrel, and if you sell all that oil at twenty cents you'll realize from it only about a hundred thousand dollars, and the profit won't come to half of that."

"You're not thinking that the price is going to stay at twenty cents a barrel, are you? What have we got proration for? What is the Legislature meeting for?"

"I'm not making book on the future price of oil, and neither is Tropoco," Leon Temple said, and grinned, and suddenly Cobb realized that the man was amused by him and by his scribbled calculations on the paper napkin.

"The hell with all those figures, then," Cobb said, and his face was red. "You can have the lease for fifty thousand, cash, and you take over fifteen thousand in oil payments."

"So you've got oil payments outstanding?" Leon Temple shook his head slightly. "I don't think the main office would be interested. But I'll put it up to 'em, if you want me to."

"Yes," Cobb said. "Get on the phone and find out, will you?"

Leon Temple chuckled. "Hell, man, this is Sunday."

"What of it?"

Leon Temple called to the counterman for two more cups of coffee, then said to Cobb, "Fifty thousand for that lease is five thousand dollars an acre. Nobody's paying prices like that and I can tell you that the Tropoco won't. What do you say to fifteen thousand dollars for the lease?"

Cobb scowled. "Man, it cost me better than twenty thousand to drill that well."

"But fifteen thousand of it was in oil payments, you said. And you've produced some oil, at that."

"Some."

"You're needing cash. How about fifteen thousand in cash?"

"I'm not needing cash that bad."

"Oh, well." Leon Temple spooned his coffee.

Cobb got up off his stool, hesitated, and bought a cigar. Leon Temple watched him. Cobb bit the end off the cigar,

lit it, and said slowly, "I'll sell it for forty thousand, but I can't go any cheaper than that."

Temple shrugged his shoulders. "Of course I'll put it up to 'em. That's the least I can do." He paid the counterman. "Let's step into the lobby for a minute, Walters." He led the way to the cigar stand in the lobby of the hotel. "How much for that box of chocolates?"

"The five-pound box?"

"Yes."

"Three-fifty."

"I'll take it. You wrap it up and give it to the boy and tell him to hurry over to the telephone office and give it to the long distance operator. Here's my card to go with it." He winked at Cobb. "Now maybe I can get a call through. Where will I get in touch with you later?"

"Call me at Ardmore Devant's ranch."

"All right, but I can tell you it's no go. Not at forty."

Cobb went to the North Garage for his car and drove to Fossil Creek and up the hill to the Devant ranchhouse. Ardmore met him at the door and Cobb said, "Can you spare a minute, Mr. Devant?"

"Yes, Cobb. Come into my study. As a matter of fact, I wanted to speak to you."

Ardmore's study opened off the wide living room and it was cool in the August heat. In a cabinet was Ardmore's collection of fossils, and over the fireplace hung the mounted horns of a longhorn steer. There were guns on the wall, a cavalry saber that Colonel Alfred Lebanon, C.S.A., had carried in the Civil War, and in another cabinet Indian arrowheads and mortars and pestles from the pueblos.

Ardmore stood with his back to the fossils. "What's on your mind, Cobb?"

"It's about that note. It came due yesterday, and . . ."

"Cobb, I make it a fixed rule never to discuss business matters on Sunday. I'm sorry."

"Oh. Well, all right. I'll be in to see you in the morning."

Ardmore inclined his head. "But I did want to talk to you about another matter, Cobb."

"Yes?"

Ardmore cleared his throat. "I feel that I have the right to bring this up, seeing I'm your prospective father-in-law."

Cobb frowned. "Bring what up?"

"Your visits to Ragtown. I understand you were engaged in a sort of brawl under questionable circumstances and in a questionable place. Cobb, we can't have that sort of thing."

"Where did you hear that?"

"If it isn't true, Cobb, please deny it, and that will be the end of it."

"Some men jumped me," Cobb said. "I was defending myself, that's all."

"And you were sober?"

"No, I wasn't sober."

Ardmore Devant sank into his easy chair, and Cobb stood looking down at him. "Does Jan know about that?"

"I felt it my duty to discuss the incident with her."

Cobb was silent for a moment, then he said, "I'm sorry it happened. I'm plenty sorry. And I'll explain it to Jan."

As he left the study Cobb saw Pruitt smiling at him from a wicker chair and walked slowly toward him. "When you said we'd bury the hatchet I didn't expect you to bury it in my back, Pruitt."

"Look at my left eye," Pruitt said.

Cobb smiled faintly. "Where is Jan?"

"On the veranda, I think."

"Come out there a minute with me, will you?"

Pruitt followed him to the veranda and Jan got quickly to her feet when she saw him. "Well, at last," she said.

She was wearing jodhpurs and half-boots, and she car-

ried a rawhide quirt in her hand. She stood erect, with her chin raised.

"Jan, I want to make something clear," Cobb said. "Pruitt, you were with me. We got drunk, Jan, but Pruitt will tell you it was just a harmless drunk."

"Pruitt, *you* were there?" Jan asked.

"So you didn't tell that part of it?" Cobb smiled coldly. "Go on, tell her that we were sealing a bargain and it was just a harmless celebration."

"I guess it was harmless," Pruitt said. "But my jaw is still sore from where you hit me, Cobb, and look at my eye!"

"Cobb, you *hit* Pruitt?" Jan's eyes opened wide.

Cobb flushed. "I guess I just didn't hit him hard enough. Jan, let me explain it. . . ."

"Oh, heavens." Jan laughed evasively, and her tone was polite and rather nasal. "Really, Cobb, you don't need to explain. I don't demand explanations." She turned to her brother. "Cobb is so dreadfully direct about everything."

"Especially about a poke in the eye," Pruitt said.

Cobb sat down and said evenly, "I'm tactless, all right. I'm just a hick. You see, Pruitt said he wanted to welcome me into the family and we decided to have a drink on it. I was dumb enough not to know what he was up to."

"Good Lord," Jan said. "Do you think it was some kind of plot? That's a pretty sorry excuse, Cobb." She flicked one boot with her quirt. "Let's just forget it. If you get any fun out of going over to Ragtown, I don't care. But it isn't pleasant to be left waiting for you. All I wondered was where you were *last* night."

"Oh," Cobb said. "Well—well, I was over in Ragtown."

"Again!" She faced him, and her lips trembled slightly. Pruitt laughed.

"This was different," Cobb said. "I went over there to see Jesse Halliday, as soon as I heard I'd won that suit."

Ardmore appeared in the doorway. "Cobb, you're wanted on the telephone."

"Thanks," Cobb said. "Jan, I . . ." He saw Pruitt's smile, Ardmore's small, bright eyes, and stopped talking. He went inside to a table in the living room, near the door of Ardmore's study, and picked up the telephone. Ardmore went past him, into the study.

Cobb lifted the receiver. "Hello."

"Hello. Walters? This is Leon Temple."

"Yes."

"Well, I put it up to 'em, and it's a one price question. Yes or no. They'll take over those oil payments outstanding and they'll take the lease off your hands for thirty thousand dollars and that's the best they can do."

"Thirty thousand? I said forty."

"That's the proposition. Fifteen thousand of it in cash and fifteen thousand out of the first quarter of the oil produced. If you want to sell you'll have a certified check for fifteen grand by special delivery mail in the morning. What do you say?"

"I'll have to say yes."

"Okay. Want to come down to the hotel and sign the papers?"

"Yes, I'll be right down."

Cobb turned back toward the veranda, but Jan was not there. He heard the sound of horse's hoofs, and saw her palomino horse galloping away from the corral. He went quietly out of the house.

In Leon Temple's room in the Lebanon House Cobb signed the papers and Temple poured a drink of whisky for each of them. "Say, Walters, there's a rumor around town that the Governor is going to shut down the East Texas field tomorrow."

"Same as they did in Oklahoma?"

"That's right. I heard he plans to call out the troops and shut down all those wells until the new conservation laws

go into effect. You know, they've got more than sixteen hundred producing wells over yonder. And this is on the Q.T., Walters, but some of the National Guard boys here in Lebanon are being called up and they're moving out tonight. I understand there's going to be a proclamation of martial law, but it hasn't come through yet."

"You mean here, too?" Cobb asked. "Martial law in Lebanon?"

Temple shook his head. "We've been obeying proration here, but they say they're producing better than a million barrels a day in East Texas. Think of that, a million barrels.—Well, this ought to be the end of ten cent oil."

"I hope so," Cobb said. "Maybe I let that lease go pretty cheap. Maybe you knew about it all the time, Temple."

Leon Temple grinned. "Maybe I did." He looked steadily at Cobb. "But if it's true and we do have martial law and we get a better price for our crude, I hope to God it will be a lesson. You fellows with big holdings have a responsibility, Walters."

"I've heard all that before," Cobb said. "Anyhow, I'm going to abide by proration. I don't want the soldiers on my leases."

"The trouble is that a man with a flush well doesn't realize that he's the stripper well operator of tomorrow," Temple said. "You just can't make him see it. I'll tell you this, Walters, for every dollar of wealth that East Texas crude creates it destroys two dollars. Let me give you an illustration. I've got a brother who's operating a pattern of stripper wells in one of the old fields and it costs him sixty to seventy cents to produce a barrel of crude. But the price of that crude is determined by the flush well operator who sells his oil at the lowest price and what's more he's taxed on the same basis as the flush well operator, who just has to turn a valve and let the crude flow up. I tell you, it's not economic and it's not just."

"I know all that," Cobb said. "Sure it's hard on the stripper wells."

"One of these days you'll be one of them. It's a vicious circle. The flush field of today is the stripper field of tomorrow. One of these days East Texas will be on the pump, and Lebanon will be on the pump, and they'll find some big new field and the same thing will happen all over again, except that the shoe will be on the other foot and you'll feel the pinch. You'll have to shut down your wells the way the stripper wells have been shut down all over the Mid-Continent area today."

"I'll worry about that when the time comes," Cobb said.

Temple frowned. "If you'd worry about it now the world would be a little better off. Walters, the oil men hold in their hands an economic treasure that has never been fully appraised. In the old days, when John D. Rockefeller was getting a dollar and a quarter a gallon for kerosene, they were pouring gasoline down the creeks because there wasn't any demand for it. There are still elements in the hydrocarbons of crude oil that we know nothing of. There's magic there to conjure up God knows what. Every day there's some new development, some new use for the hydrocarbons of petroleum. And yet we're burning it for fuel. We're consuming it in our furnaces. We're in competition with coal and we're throwing miners out of work and we're throwing oil workers out of work in the stripper fields, and we're burning up magic to do it. We don't even know what we're wasting away, and I'd hate to be here, maybe a hundred years from now, when they'll have to sink shafts here where you're drilling wells. When they'll have to sink shafts and *mine* the oil sands to recover what we've wasted away. And, Walters, that's what they'll have to do, at least in the shallow fields."

"Oh, I agree there's waste and all that," Cobb said. "But leave it to science, Temple. A hundred years from now there'll be no use for petroleum, just as we got no use for

whale oil now. They'll work out something better. They'll work out a new source of power."

"I guess they'll have to," Temple said. "The way things are."

Cobb drove to the yellow house on Sycamore Street, and he felt at peace as he sat with his parents on the piazza and drank iced tea. They watched the sun sink from sight, trailed by pink clouds tipped with silver, and they watched the swift twilight come. Tom Walters sighed and said, "Here in the city a man forgets, and that big red sun might as soon have been a neon light. You don't hear the cows lowing and you don't hear the mockingbirds sing and you don't see the chickens go to roost and you forget what all that means. Here in the city a man gets to feel he's kind of important and that sun is just a big special light hung out there on the horizon. Cobb, ain't that right?"

"You mean you want to go back and live in the country?" Cobb asked.

"Your Maw and me have been turning that over in our minds. What do you think?"

"All right," Cobb said. "I'll see if I can pick up a good farm down on the river."

"Maybe we'd be better off back on Fossil Creek," Ada said. "Don't you think so, Cobb?"

Cobb smiled and patted her shoulder. "Maybe so, Mom. I'll see what can be done about it."

"There's an oil well spudded in on that old farm," Tom Walters said. "I kind of hate to think of it covered over with derricks, and it's a crime and a shame the way the creek is choked with mud from them rotary rigs. It's mighty good farm land out there, and a man can't help having a special feeling for land like that. Through all these years the Comanche Indians lit their campfires there and the Spanish passed that way and the prairie grass grewed high, and then it was me who come along and took up the first patent on that land. I was the first man

that quarter section ever belonged to, Cobb, in all these thousands of years. Now do you wonder I got a special feeling?"

"No, I don't," Cobb said. "Dad, I'll see what I can do about getting that farm back."

Tom Walters smiled. "I already taken steps, Cobb."

Ada Walters broke in. "Son, I don't know whether we did right with your money. I'm afraid you're going to think we're wasteful with it, but we took and bought that farm back."

"That's fine," Cobb said. "Mom, I'm glad you did."

"After all the years he was after that farm, Ardmore was glad to get rid of it," Tom Walters said. "With oil derricks on it, it's no use to him for raising cattle. But he asked a high price just the same. You recollect he paid us thirty dollars an acre for it, son, but he asked fifty, and he kept that share in the mineral rights."

"So he bought it for less than five thousand and sold it back for eight thousand?" Cobb said. "That's Ardmore Devant for you."

"And at that he made out he was doing us a favor," Tom Walters added. "Cobb, you don't think we were wasteful with the money?"

"No," Cobb said. "I sure don't. I'm glad to have my home back again."

33

THE flares of sixteen hundred wells in the East Texas field were snuffed out like candles on a birthday cake, and the green crude that had rushed up out of the rock through a thousand miles of two and one-half inch tubing flowed no more when the first four troops of cavalry rode into the oil belt early on the morning of the seventeenth of August to protect the authority of the state of Texas.

The soldiers rode in among the derricks and made camp, and early on that morning men and women who had made their lives by night were on the roads leading out of Kilgore and Gladewater, leading out of the rat houses and the roadhouses and the gambling houses of the East Texas field. The gas flares were snuffed out and the lights in the brothels and the dance joints burned no more, and prostitutes and criminals took the first trains out of town, or drove out on roads still clogged with trucks bringing drilling machinery to the field, or hitched rides on the highway.

When the troops marched in the valves were closed and the flow of crude from the ancient shoreline of that ancient sea was checked, and the oil that had been held captive for a hundred million years, and brought to the surface through sixteen hundred holes drilled into the earth, was shut in again.

There had been Indians in that country, and then the Spanish had come, and before the days of the Republic of Texas there had been surveys and grants of land. From a whiteoak tree with a butt measuring eight inches, north three hundred varas to a stake driven into the ground, east

nine hundred varas to a sycamore tree with a trunk twelve inches in diameter . . . so was the land measured out, so was forty acres of the earth's surface delimited, and it was forty acres laid down by sediment and erosion through geologic ages more than half a mile above the shoreline of that Cretaceous sea.

The whiteoak tree was gone and the stake had rotted away and the sycamore tree was a stump in a clearing, and that designated land had been sold for a keg of whisky, for a hundred dollars, for five hundred dollars. It had been leased for a thousand-dollar bonus and now there was an oil derrick and there were lease tanks and the operator had cut away the iron stairs leading to the top of his tanks so that the agents of proration could not measure the level of the oil and could not tell whether he was producing more than the law said was his share, in that year 1931, of petroleum trapped by the Sabine Uplift in the shoreline sand bar laid down a hundred million years ago.

The troops—eleven hundred men—shut down the sixteen hundred wells and stopped the flow of oil, and as had happened at Borger and Mexia when the troops came in, the unruly element crowded the highways out of town and turned toward other oil towns, where there was a boom. In that August of 1931 many of them turned toward Lebanon and the boom town of Devant.

In Lebanon they were pleased with the proclamation of martial law in East Texas. That was what Cobb heard as he went down to breakfast in the coffee shop of the hotel, as he went down to breakfast with two letters in his pocket. One contained a certified check for fifteen thousand dollars from the Trading Post Oil Company, and the other was a notice from the Lebanon National Bank that he was in default in payment of a note for thirty-one thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars.

He listened to the talk as he sipped his coffee. Why, one feller out in East Texas ordered the Railroad Commission

off his lease last Friday. They held a mass meeting in Tyler, you know, fifteen hundred of 'em, and asked the Governor for the proclamation. It's a funny thing, the commander of them troops is a lawyer for one of the big companies, and I hear some of them oil field workers had to get into uniform and shut down the wells they helped to drill. The troops are still out in Oklahoma, too, and Alfalfa Bill says it's a buck or nothing. They're talking about running that feller for president. What chance you think he's got? . . .

Fifteen thousand dollars from Tropoco, a fifteen thousand dollar loan on his railroad stock, seven-odd thousand in cash in the bank. Thirty-seven thousand dollars in the bank. And that Lord's Adopted lease, I took a beating on that, Cobb thought. With East Texas shut down the price of oil is bound to rise, and maybe it will be a dollar a barrel again. Maybe that crusty old Governor in Oklahoma knows what he's talking about and maybe they'll nominate him for the presidency. But if the price of crude goes up to a buck a barrel then the Lord's Adopted lease is worth better than thirty grand and I took a beating on that deal, for a fact. But I had to sell it and I had to get the money and what difference does it make? The Cobb Walters Oil Company is mine again and I got sixteen hundred proven acres and if the price of oil goes up I'll have a world of dough and I'll build me that big refinery, and no prairie dog job with a few straight stills, but a modern plant with catalytic cracking and a chain of filling stations and a fleet of trucks to run Cobbco gas in bulk. . . .

Cobb paid for the coffee and went out into the heat of the August sun. He walked to the Lebanon National Bank, and as he entered the building Pruitt looked up and nodded and the suggestion of a smile on his full lips was not friendly. There was a curling lift of the muscles that had made that smile. So Cobb stopped at Pruitt's window and deposited the check for fifteen thousand dollars, and Pruitt

turned it over to verify the endorsement and raised his eyebrows and said, "You sold that well kind of cheap, Cobb."

Cobb's face was hot. "In the first place, I don't know as it's any of your business, Pruitt. And in the second place, what makes you think I sold a well?"

Pruitt flipped Cobb's deposit book out to him. "I don't know what else the Trading Post Oil Company would buy from you except an oil well, and you've only got one well that I know of."

"And besides, you heard me talking on the telephone," Cobb said. "Sure, I sold it, for fifteen thousand in cash and a hundred thousand out of the first quarter of the oil produced. It was too good a deal to pass up."

Cobb went on to Ardmore Devant's office, and Ardmore rose to shake his hand. He dismissed his secretary. "Cobb, what can I do for you."

"I believe I owe you some money," Cobb said. "I got a notice from the bank this morning."

"Yes, indeed. Just a minute. I have the papers here in my desk." Ardmore sat down and opened a drawer. "There's a pen and ink, if you want to make out a check."

"All right," Cobb said. "It's thirty-one thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars, I believe."

"Why, no," Ardmore said. "I believe the total sum is—Let's see, I have it here. It's sixty-two thousand, five hundred dollars, Cobb."

Cobb gazed across at Ardmore for a moment, then nodded. "I don't mean the amount outstanding. I mean what's due now. It comes to thirty-one thousand, two hundred and fifty."

Ardmore placed some papers neatly on the desk in front of him. "Cobb, your note was due two days ago. It was due on Saturday, the fifteenth of August."

"Yes, I know. I couldn't make it on Saturday."

"We sent you formal notice that the note was in de-

fault, Cobb, and as you recollect, the terms of the loan are that if any one payment is in default the entire amount falls due. That comes to sixty-two thousand, five hundred dollars."

Cobb could not speak.

"You will recall that we lent you fifteen thousand dollars originally," Ardmore went on. "But when you wanted a larger loan we agreed to let you have an additional hundred thousand on a discount basis, payable quarterly, and provided that in case of default the outstanding amount became due and payable. You made two payments, one on the fifteenth of February and the other on May fifteenth, so the amount outstanding is sixty-two thousand, five hundred dollars. Does that check with you?"

The pen-point broke under the pressure of Cobb's hand on the stem of the pen. He dropped the pen on the desk. "I don't have the money available, Mr. Devant. It will take me a little while to get it."

"Certainly." Ardmore glanced at his watch. "We'll give you until the close of the day. Until three o'clock, Cobb. We don't want to press you."

"No," Cobb said. He kept his voice steady. "I'm sure of that."

"But naturally we'll take possession of your collateral if settlement is not made by three o'clock," Ardmore said, and his tone was cold and his eyes were as expressionless as bits of metal.

"I'll be back before three," Cobb said, and walked away.

What a damned fool, he thought as he went out to the street. I had my eyes shut. Of course he'd do anything he could to bust up my marriage with Jan and he knew just how much cash I had on hand and he heard that telephone conversation when he was in his den and he knew I'd sold the Lord's Adopted lease and for how much, and I guess he knew I pledged that railroad stock. He knew

exactly what my assets were and he waited for his chance and now he's got his chance.

Cobb glanced at the courthouse tower. It was ten o'clock. He had thirty-seven thousand dollars in cash, and he had five hours in which to raise an additional twenty-five thousand. Five hours in which to redeem the Cobb Walters Oil Company and sixteen hundred acres of proven land and fifteen producing wells, and if it was worth a dollar it was worth three million dollars.

Cobb hurried past the Lebanon House to the southwest corner of the square and turned into the City Bank. Yes, he could see Mr. Fleming. Go right into his office.

"Cobb," Harvey Fleming said. "This is a good one. Listen here, I was over in the barber shop this morning and . . ."

"Mr. Fleming," Cobb broke in. "I'm in kind of a hurry."

"Yes?" Harvey tugged at one of the locks of white hair that hung in bangs over his forehead.

"Mr. Fleming, I sold my well on the Lord's Adopted lease and fifteen thousand of it is in oil payments. I want to get some cash on that."

"We discount oil payments at fifty per cent, Cobb."

"Yes, I know. That will be seven thousand, five hundred dollars, and I want it right away. And there's another thing. Mr. Fleming, have you seen that house I built on Sycamore Street?"

"Oh, yes." Harvey Fleming smiled. "The petrified house."

"That house cost me better than thirty-five thousand," Cobb said. "I want to get twenty-five or thirty thousand on it right away. I want to put a mortgage on it."

"Is it free and clear, Cobb?"

"You bet it is."

"Sit down, son, sit down." Harvey swung around in his swivel chair. "You know, real estate ain't what it used to

be, and there's not much demand for a house of that character."

"You can't tell," Cobb said. "There never was a house of that character before."

"True enough." Harvey smiled. "But naturally we have to take into account what could be done with it if it came into our hands."

"Sure," Cobb said. "Never mind the thirty thousand. Make it twenty-five. As far as that goes twenty thousand will be enough."

"You seem to be in a hurry for the money, Cobb."

"I don't mind admitting that I am. I'm in a big hurry and I'd appreciate it if you'd push things along for me."

"I'll try, Cobb. Have you the papers with you?"

"No. I'll get 'em right away."

Harvey glanced at the wall clock. "Let's see. It's ten-fifteen. Suppose you send the papers around to me and then come back about noon. Taxes paid and all that?"

"Yes." Cobb stood up. "I'll be back at noon, then, and I sure appreciate it, Mr. Fleming."

When he was on the public square again Cobb felt better. He went to the Alamo Café for a cup of coffee and he thought, was it possible that Ardmore Devant could have laid his plans so carefully? He had known exactly what Cobb's assets were, at any time, but could he have planned so carefully as to force Cobb into a hole? Could he have been behind the suit Jesse Halliday brought against the company? Cobb shook his head. It was not possible. It was fantastic.

From time to time Cobb glanced anxiously at the clock; at ten-thirty, at ten forty-five, at five minutes to eleven. He drank three cups of coffee and he thought, I still got four hours and a half . . . I got four hours now. . . .

At ten minutes past eleven he left the café and walked around the square, past the *Lebanon News*, the telephone office, the Lebanon House, the five and ten, and the Cobb

Walters Oil Company. He looked up at the open windows, then walked on, past the hardware store and the postoffice, a grocery store and the North Garage, Ned Barstow's drug store and the Lone Star Cleaners, and he was again on the south side of the square. He went into the City Bank on the corner.

It was eleven-thirty now, and Cobb waited. He sat on a bench, he went to the water cooler for a drink, he smoked a cigarette, and another, and then Harvey Fleming's secretary came out of the president's office and saw him and hurried toward him. "Mr. Fleming is waiting for you, Mr. Walters."

"Thanks," Cobb said, and went to the door at the rear.

Harvey Fleming was frowning. "Sit down, Cobb." He moved some papers on his desk. "Look here, you didn't tell me that property was your homestead."

"Homestead?" Cobb said. "Is it?"

"It's entered on the tax rolls as your homestead."

"The real estate people attended to that." Cobb looked at Harvey's face. "Why? What difference does it make?"

"Son, we can't make a mortgage on your homestead. Don't you know that? Under Texas law we couldn't foreclose such a mortgage. Cobb, I'm afraid we can't let you have the money."

"I've got to have that money." Cobb sank back in his chair, and his upper lip was wet with sweat. "Mr. Fleming, ain't there some way?"

"No, Cobb . . . unless you can sell the house."

Cobb got nervously to his feet. "I guess you're not in the market.—Mr. Fleming, I just got a few hours. Do you know a prospect? I'll sacrifice it. I'll let it go for twenty thousand dollars, cash."

"Cobb, I'm sorry." Harvey knit his eyebrows. "Let's see. Maybe somebody who's cashed in on oil. . . ."

"Like old John Goback," Cobb said. "I can try him."

They were wanting a house. Anybody else, Mr. Fleming?"

"Cobb, I really don't know a soul in the market for a house like that. If it was a small house I think you could turn it."

Cobb picked up his hat. "Well, I got to work fast."

He went to the North Garage for his car and took the road to the oil field, past the Abernathy well, to the Goback lease. There were two derricks near the Goback farmhouse. Cobb turned in at the gate, skirted a battery of lease tanks, and stopped at a picket fence. As he opened the gate he saw Dolly Goback sitting on the porch. She stood up and waved her hand, and her grin showed large gray teeth. "Hello there, Cobb."

"Dolly, is your father home?"

"No, he went to town. Maw, too."

"They tell me you're fixing to get married, Dolly."

She smiled. "The first of September. Cobb, I'd sure like to have you come to the wedding. We're getting invitations all printed out. I'm going to send you one."

"Where are you-all going to live? Dolly, have you got a house in mind? If you ain't I'll sell you the house I built on Sycamore Street and I'll sell it to you cheap."

"Oh, we already bought a house, Cobb." Dolly laughed. "We ain't through paying for it yet."

Cobb glanced at his watch. "I'm sorry to rush off. I wanted to see your father."

It was a quarter to one. Cobb turned back to the highway and drove to town. He went to a real estate office and waited five minutes while Nolan Jennings notarized some oil leases. No, Nolan didn't know of any prospect. But he'd get to work on it right away. Until three o'clock? Hell, Cobb, that's only two hours. But I'll do my best. Not many people can get up that much cash in a couple of hours. You know that.

Cobb knew that. He told Nolan to call him at the Leb-

anon House if anything came up and returned to his room and drew the shades against the August sun. He sat alone in the dim room. The alarm clock on the bureau ticked loudly in the silence and he could hear the ticking of his wrist watch as he sat with his cheek resting on his fist. He heard the courthouse clock strike two and he picked up the telephone and called Nolan Jennings.

He was working on it, Nolan said, but the house was too big. It was too expensive. And that petrified wood! It was too unconventional. He was getting nowhere fast, but there was another hour, wasn't there?

Cobb called his office and Nancy Jo Paige answered the phone. Her voice dropped a register. "Hello, darling, your desk is all cleaned up for you. When are you coming in?"

"Listen, do you know anybody wants to buy a house?"

"A house?"

"My house."

"Cobb, is anything wrong?"

"I just got to sell my house, that's all. I got to raise some money."

"How much?"

"About eighteen thousand dollars."

"Oh—well. I haven't got *that* much. Cobb, what's wrong?"

"I'll tell you," Cobb said. "I've got just one hour to raise eighteen thousand dollars to pay off my note at the bank, and if I can't do it I'm sunk. They'll take over my collateral and my collateral is my stock in the company and they'll sell me out."

"Good heavens," Nancy Jo cried. "How did you ever get in such a mess?"

"I'll tell you how." Cobb's face twisted in a sour grin. "You know the old saying. . . . I couldn't stand prosperity."

Nancy Jo hesitated an instant. "Darling, I'll call Pop. Maybe he can scrape it up."

"No," Cobb said. "Let's leave Ralph out of this."

"Where are you? At the hotel?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll call you back." She hung up.

Cobb called the Joplin house on Persimmon Street. Clara's voice was light and gentle and he felt a tugging at his heart. "Clara, this is Cobb."

"Well, how are you?" Her tone still was light, but had a crisp quality.

"Clara, you want to do me a favor?"

"Of course. What is it, Cobb?"

"I want to sell that house I built and I thought you might know of a prospect."

"I don't believe I do, Cobb."

"Well, I thought Will Andrews might be interested."

Clara laughed. "Oh, not Will. He wouldn't want a house like that one, Cobb. His taste runs a little more on the conservative side."

"Then you and Nora . . ." Cobb began. "Say, how is Nora?"

"Just fine." Clara hesitated. "Cobb, you sound sort of low."

"Low?" Cobb said. "Hell, no. I'm in great shape. Tell Nora I'll be around to see her in a day or so."

Cobb hung up and almost immediately the telephone rang; it was Nolan Jennings calling. Cobb said, "Yes," in a steady voice.

"Cobb, if I just had a week or ten days to work on this I could make a sale, but, man, with only a couple of hours to work in, I can't turn it. It just can't be done."

"All right," Cobb said flatly. "Thanks for trying, Nolan."

It was after two-thirty. Cobb washed his face and hands, put on his hat, and went down to the lobby. He bought a

fifty-cent cigar and lit it and walked to the Lebanon National Bank on the north side of the square.

Ardmore Devant received Cobb in his office. Cobb waved the cigar lightly as he took the chair Ardmore indicated. "I'll need a little more time, Mr. Devant," he said. "Just a day or so. I'm a few thousand short today."

Ardmore sat down.

"Suppose I settle up next Monday?" Cobb said.

Ardmore's head moved slightly to one side. "Cobb, I think we've been very generous in this matter. Your note was in default two days ago, and at that time it appeared that the collateral which secured it might well be worthless. We didn't even hear from you that day. Not a word. So in accordance with the terms of the loan we formally notified you that you were in default and that we would have to call in your collateral. In the meantime the litigation has been disposed of and it appears that the collateral may, after all, have some value. We gave you a period of grace in which to meet your obligations, but you failed to do so, so the only course open to us is to take over that collateral. I'm sorry."

"But I'll only need a few days, until I sell my house."

"I'm sorry, Cobb," Ardmore said, and his thin lips clamped tightly shut.

Cobb crushed out his cigar in an ashtray on Ardmore's desk. "Now listen here, I can get the money. I don't want you to go and sell out my interest in that company."

"Perhaps we won't sell it," Ardmore said. "Of course there is no fixed value on that stock. The par value, I believe, is twenty-seven thousand dollars, but it might bring more than that if we tried to sell it. No, Cobb, I think we'll hang onto that collateral for a while and maybe we'll realize enough on it to cover our loss on the loan."

"Cover your loss!" Cobb cried. "Why, you could walk out of here today and get anyhow a couple of million dollars for that stock and you know it. It's the controlling

interest in the Cobb Walters Oil Company with sixteen hundred acres of proven oil land and fifteen producing wells worth anyhow three million dollars."

"Those are optimistic figures, I believe," Ardmore said.

"Now look here, Mr. Devant, you've got to take and sell that stock, then, and turn over the equity to me. You know damned well you could get a couple of million for it."

"Cobb," Ardmore said slowly, "hasn't it occurred to you that you are not in a position to dictate? This bank made you a sizable loan. As a matter of fact it's the biggest loan we ever made. And under the terms of that loan, Cobb, we take over the collateral if you let it go to default, and you *did* let it go to default and we *have* taken over the collateral, and that's the end of it. I said I'd give you until three o'clock, and it now lacks two minutes to three. If I have your check for sixty-two thousand, five hundred dollars in the next two minutes we'll return your collateral. But if not, well, I have your note and I'll cancel it and you can have it."

Cobb sat on the edge of his chair, and his face was white. He kept biting his lower lip and his fists were clenched and his eyes were fixed on the lower part of Ardmore's jaw.

"Cobb, you've been reckless in everything you've done," Ardmore said. "You were reckless in your oil operations. You were reckless in your financial obligations, and . . ." his voice dropped lower, "you were reckless in your relations with my daughter." He drew his head back and looked down his nose at Cobb. "I'll tell you what we're going to do. When the time is right we're going to sell out the control of that company, and we're going to sell it to responsible men. We're going to sell it to a company that has had years of experience in this field and will be able to administer the property for the best interests of the stockholders."

"Mr. Devant," Cobb said slowly. "You set out to break me, didn't you?"

There seemed to be a faint smile on Ardmore's face, but he did not reply.

"You made a plan to break me," Cobb went on. "And you were behind that suit of Jesse Halliday's, weren't you?"

The smile on Ardmore's face became definite. "No, Cobb, that suit was not my idea. But I *have* got you where I want you, and you know it and I know it." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "Here's your canceled note. It's after three o'clock. Good day, Cobb."

Cobb got to his feet. "Whose idea was it to file that suit?"

"I presume it was Mr. Halliday's notion. Don't let your imagination run away with you, Cobb."

As Cobb walked out of the bank he remembered the story of Ardmore's father, old Bowman Devant, who had settled a law suit with a forty-four back in 1897. He should have thought of Bowman Devant before. He had served in Longstreet's Corps in the Civil War. He had moved to Texas and had established the first bank in Lebanon out of money he had made on the old Baxter Springs trail. He had driven a herd north to the railhead in Abilene, Kansas, and had come back across the Indian Territory in a spring buggy with eighteen thousand dollars in gold under his feet and an old Henry repeating rifle at his elbow. He had lived through the days when marauding Kiowas had swept down from the reservation north of the Red River on moonlit nights to steal horses and take scalps. And when a client had failed to repay a loan secured by five hundred head of cattle, and yet the herd was not to be found, Bowman Devant had muttered a phrase on the insecurity of security on the hoof and had loaded his forty-four. His bland explanation had been that he thought the other fellow was reaching for his gun and that he ought to have

known better than to carry his handkerchief in his hip pocket. Cobb thought of Bowman Devant, and reflected that Ardmore was his son and that there was the same directness in the son, and that he ought to have remembered Bowman Devant before.

Cobb turned the corner of the bank building and ran up the steps to Oliver Wade's office. The lawyer got to his feet as Cobb pushed open the door, and stood with his mouth open slightly, his back to the window, while Cobb talked until he ran out of breath.

"Oliver, he can't get away with that! Can he get away with that? What can we do?"

Oliver Wade cleared his throat. "Cobb, you should have consulted me *before* you negotiated that loan. You know, a lawyer is pretty good preventive medicine."

"Yes, I know. But see here, Oliver, can he get away with it? That's what I want to know?"

Oliver considered. "Possibly you've got a law suit, Cobb, but I can't promise anything. Maybe we can recover your equity, but I can't promise it."

"Then we'll bring suit," Cobb said.

"Perhaps if I talk it over with Ardmore we can reach an agreement," Oliver said. He chuckled. "I never expected to see Ardmore acting like a New York banker."

"There's no use talking to him," Cobb said. "You better just file suit."

"That's up to you, Cobb. But frankly, son, we haven't got much to go on. Under the terms of that loan you agreed that the bank should possess your collateral in case of default. You should have been more careful in what you signed."

"Christ, Oliver, how was I to know? If it hadn't been for that nuisance suit, tying me up, I'd of paid off that loan." He looked at Oliver's gray face. "Say, you can *win* that suit, can't you?"

"Cobb, let's talk it over later, when you've cooled off."

Cobb looked at the lawyer's expressionless eyes, turned, and went down to the street. The afternoon sun was very dry and hot. He walked to the corner building where Ned Barstow had formerly operated a drug store and bought a quart of whisky at the pinewood bar. It was wrapped in brown paper and he carried it to the hotel and went up to his rooms. As he opened the door the telephone was ringing. It was Nancy Jo Paige calling.

"Cobb, what happened? Pop just came in and he transferred your stock to the Lebanon National and called a directors' meeting for the first thing in the morning. Cobb, tell me."

"I got pushed out in the cold, Nancy Jo," Cobb said.

"Oh, my poor darling."

"Ardmore took over my collateral and I can go to law about it and by God I am going to law about it, but between you and me I'm afraid they got me hooked. Nancy Jo, they made a plan and they trapped me in it, and that suit of Halliday's was part of the plan. Remember I said there was something behind it but I couldn't figure what? Well, now I know. They figured out a plan to steal that company off me and it looks like it worked."

"Cobb, I'm coming up to see you."

"No. No, Nancy Jo, I want to sit here a little bit. I'll call you later."

Cobb hung up, then signaled the operator and told her to shut off incoming calls. He went into the bathroom and washed out the toothbrush glass and brought it back to the chair by the window. He filled it half-full of whisky.

He knew now that they had been out to get him, and that Ardmore Devant had thought of nothing else since his engagement to Jan. Ardmore watched everything I done, he thought, and he always knew to a penny what my assets were and he paid the bill for Jesse Halliday's suit, sure as hell. Or maybe it wasn't him. It could have been Will Andrews. He made a crack once about my winning

those leases in a poker game. He knew about that, and of course it was Clara told him. But Ardmore didn't know, and Jan didn't know, and Ralph Paige didn't know. Or did they know?

Cobb picked up the bottle and went to the bed and lay looking at the ceiling. He drank some more whisky out of the bottle and then he put the bottle on the floor beside the bed and turned on his stomach and pressed his face into the pillow. His cheeks were hot and his eyes were hot and his shoulders shook once with a soundless sob. He clenched his teeth and his lips drew back and the muscles of his face tightened. Then he sat upright and swung his legs over the edge of the bed and reached for the bottle. He took another drink and his hand shook and his stomach turned over inside. He thought of Clara in his room in the house on Persimmon Street on that hot morning when Nora had gone to town—it was a year ago now—and he thought of Nancy Jo here in this room and he thought of Jan that night when the Goback well had come in, when they had stood together and watched the flow of oil. He remembered how her dress had been speckled with crude and how he had kissed her there under the mesquite tree and asked her to be his wife. And he thought of Ardmore that autumn day in the bank, too upset to speak, that day when he had first asked for the loan and had said that he would marry Jan. Ardmore had hated him that day, but still he felt no hatred toward Ardmore Devant and he could not be angry. He had forgotten all these things, and they had meant not much to him, but now he saw what they had meant to others. To Clara and Nancy Jo and Jan and Ardmore Devant. He drank deeply from the bottle.

It was so soft a rap that he hardly heard it, but he held the bottle half-way to his lips and listened. The knock came again and he asked, "Who is it?"

"It's I, Cobb."

Nancy Jo Paige. Cobb felt a sudden eagerness to see her and to warm himself in her belief. He went quickly to the door and opened it. But it was not Nancy Jo; it was Jan.

"Your phone was cut off," Jan said. "So I came up."

"Come in," Cobb said. "Come in, honey."

She came three steps into the room and Cobb shut the door. He went to the windows and raised the shades and the light that filled the room was the cathedral light of the sunset.

"Cobb," Jan said. "I thought we could talk better here than at my house."

He nodded, watching her face.

"Come and kiss me, Cobb," she said.

He stepped forward and as his arms went around her she raised her chin and closed her eyes and he stood a moment looking at her pale face and then he kissed her cheek. "Jan, I'm sure sorry for the way I've acted," he said in a quick, shy tone.

"It's all right. I understand."

"It won't ever be like that again."

She opened her eyes. "Kiss me, Cobb. Let's forget it."

He bent his head and suddenly her lips pressed hard against his and her breath came fast and her fingers pressed his arm. She had never kissed him so before, and Cobb thought of Clara and Nancy Jo and of other women and not of Jan. He drew his head back and her grip tightened on his arm.

"No," she whispered.

He kissed her again and still he remembered other women and he had always thought of Jan in a different way, and he did not like to think of her as he thought of other women, and the truth of what that was came to him. But his blood pounded and he held her tight and kissed her warm throat and her ear, and in the failing light her face showed white and strained.

"I love you, Jan," Cobb whispered, but he knew then that his feeling for her was gone and now it was part of the great emptiness that he had felt all that day.

Her arms slipped around his neck and clung there and her body pressed against his and he saw that her eyes were shut so hard that the eyelids were puckered. He kissed her eyes and then he broke away from her and suddenly he was angry. He picked up the bottle and the glass and poured a drink of whisky, and she stood by the bed with her arms hanging limply by her sides and he saw that she was trembling a little. He gave her the glass of whisky and he drank from the bottle. When he looked at her again he said in a flat, harsh voice, "We ain't going to be married. Is that it?"

"Cobb, I . . ." She sat down on the edge of the bed and raised the glass. He could see that she needed a drink.

"Is that it or ain't it?" Cobb asked.

She did not answer and he said hoarsely, "I ain't in the mood for sacrifices. I don't like it. If you want it broken off then it's broke off and that's the end of it. You don't have to be noble about it."

Color came into her face and her eyes opened wider. "But I only thought . . . Well, yes, Cobb, it is all off."

His voice was more even. "I appreciate it, Jan, but I just don't like it." He sat down beside her on the bed and poured more whisky in her glass. "Hell, it's all a mess. Let's just sit and look at it. Let's don't try to clean it up."

Jan drank some of the liquor.

"I don't care," Cobb said. "I expected it. We never was right for each other and we both knew it." He looked at her closely. "So you don't need to be scared any more."

"Scared?"

"Yes, you were scared."

She finished the whisky.

"You didn't like it one bit," Cobb said. "Well, neither did I. Not that way."

"It *is* a mess," Jan said in a low, unnatural voice.

"Ain't it? But listen here, Jan, there's no anger in me. Not against you. Not against Ardmore. Not against nobody. It's just a mess and I guess like a cow on the prairie I got to eat it."

"You'll be all right, Cobb."

"Sure I will."

"You'll keep going up. You've got it in you."

"I don't know. I don't know whether up is the right direction for me."

"I didn't mean that."

"I know it. I know what you meant."

"I meant you'll go out and get what you want."

"Sure, soon as I know what it is I want. I wanted you, but it was like a boy wanting a pair of star boots and a big white hat." He looked at her. "That's what it was."

"Then you don't care?"

"No, I don't care."

"I was afraid you'd hate me."

"Hell, no." He filled her glass again.

"But I can't help it, Cobb."

"No."

"And it isn't all this. It isn't because of this *other* mess."

"No?"

"Of course not."

"Yes, I see that." The light had failed now, and he could barely see her face.

"Cobb, I don't want you to think that."

"I don't think that. Look here." He put his hand heavily on her arm. "What I can't figure out is why you said you'd marry me in the first place."

"I *wanted* to marry you, Cobb."

"I wonder about that."

"Oh, I did."

"But not now?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's different now. It's been so long."

"Yes," Cobb said. "But why in the first place?"

"I just wanted to, that's all."

"All right, but not for the same reason I wanted to marry you."

"Maybe. Maybe for exactly the same reason."

He shook his head. "I can't believe that."

"It's true. In a different way. I thought you were the one."

"Me? I don't see why."

"Well, you're so strong. You're so direct. Oh, I don't know. You're virile. You know what you want. I guess that's what I thought."

"Listen here," Cobb said. "You were married before. Has that got anything to do with it?"

"Cobb, it's a bad enough mess now."

"Yes, it's bad. But it's my mess, not yours. You never loved me, did you, Jan?"

She hesitated. "I guess I didn't know how I felt. I thought I was in love with you, Cobb."

"But now you know different?"

"Yes."

"That's good, then." Cobb took a drink from the bottle. "So it was this other marriage?"

"Please, Cobb."

"But it was. And it didn't work out and it was busted up and you wanted to marry me for spite, is that it?"

"No, that isn't it at all."

"But you've heard from this guy, I'll bet."

She hesitated an instant. "Yes, I've heard from him. But, Cobb, it isn't that and it wasn't spite. Don't think that."

"Look here, Jan." He found her hand and held it. "Why don't you just tell me the whole story? The chips are down now. It's all over now."

Her hand remained in his. "There's nothing to tell. It

was all mixed up, too. I met him in New York, when I was studying there, and somehow it seemed easier to elope and so we went down to Virginia. But you know Father. He was furious about it and he wanted to do something about it."

"Sure, I see that." Cobb grinned bitterly in the darkness.

"Of course I wanted to patch things up, and after a while I came back to Texas to talk it over with Father. He was subtle about it. We didn't fight. But the trouble was I came alone, and *he* stayed up east, and I didn't know it then but it was a sort of trial separation and Father worked it out that way. I was down here a long time and he didn't come down after me and I thought he didn't have much backbone and he couldn't have wanted me very much, so . . ."

"So Ardmore filed divorce papers," Cobb said.

"Yes."

"And so you were going to marry me and you were going to spite Ardmore and you were going to spite this guy, too."

"No, that wasn't it, Cobb. I told you how I felt. I was honest with you. I tried to be fair. You came along, and you were exciting and things were happening and I thought the rest was all forgotten."

"It's all right," Cobb said. "I hope you can fix things up."

Suddenly she got up from the bed and walked away from him, toward the door. He heard the slight squeak of the turning knob and then there was an angle of light from the corridor.

"I wonder if it would have worked out with us," Cobb said.

The door opened wide and he stood up. "Wait a minute, Jan." He walked over to the door and in the light from

the hall he could see her face. "Listen, we can be friends and we never could be friends before. How is that?"

"Yes, let's be friends."

He put out his hand and she took it. "And we'll clean things up and you'll never know there was a mess," Cobb said. "Don't worry about that."

"No, I'm not worried. Good-by, Cobb."

"So long, Jan."

He shut the door and did not watch her go along the hall to the stairs, and as he turned back into the room he felt better. He took the bottle to the easy chair by the window and sat down and drank some more and lit a cigarette and looked out at the electric lights as they flashed on in the town square. It was a mess and he would have to eat it, he thought. Like a cow on the prairie and she births a calf and she has to eat the afterbirth so the wolves won't track her down. I made this mess myself, he thought. I pushed my luck and I was riding too damned high all the time and I stuck my chin out. I never thought they'd be laying for me, but they were. Ardmore was laying for me and Will Andrews was laying for me because of pro-rata and Jesse Halliday was laying for me because he let those leases get away from him, and I guess Clara, too, and she had a reason. But they didn't bring that suit just to try to take the leases away from me because they didn't have a case and they knew they couldn't do it, even with lies. They brought that suit to take the company out of my hands and force me into a hole and take the whole damned thing away from me and that's what they done. But I wonder. They'd have to count on me riding high and acting like a damned fool instead of playing safe and paying off those notes as they came due and just waiting for the judge's decision. God knows I was a fool. I just couldn't stand prosperity, and that's a fact.

The bottle was empty and Cobb dropped it on the carpet. He smoked another cigarette and he was thirsty. He

got up and went to the closet and took out a lightweight jacket. It was a hot night, but he wore the jacket and he put on his Panama hat and then he went to the bureau and opened a drawer where there was a detective special thirty-two caliber revolver with a nickel-plated handle. He put it in his hip pocket and the tail of his coat covered it, but there was a slight bulge, even with the coat unbuttoned.

As he went down the stairs, Cobb patted his hip pocket where the gun was, and he thought that a man ought always to carry a gun when he went to Ragtown. He ought to have a gun handy and eyes in the back of his head when he went to a town like that one. In the past few weeks there had been three shootings in Ragtown, there had been several robberies and a half dozen fires. But it was a good place to go. You could get drunk there and nobody gave a damn and everybody else was drinking and it was every man for himself. Everybody had to look out for himself over there.

Cobb walked to the North Garage and waited by the gasoline pump while Joe Simmons brought the yellow car out. Joe Simmons, the boy who had lived on the farm Cobb's parents had taken from Ardmore Devant, the boy who was engaged to marry Dolly Goback. He grinned at Cobb and held the door open for him, and as he drove away Cobb remembered the sweetness of hay cut for baling and he remembered the cool, flat taste of water from the jug that Dolly Goback had brought him a long time ago. She would be a good wife and she would bear Joe seven sons and she would send them off to church with seven little Bibles and she would take them down to the tabernacle to roll in the hay and raise their arms and cry out "Hallelujah!"

Cobb laughed and drove on toward Devant. He felt very good. He could use another drink, but he felt good. To hell with all of them, he thought, Ardmore and Pruitt and Ralph Paige and Good Willie Andrews. Yes, and Jan.

I might have known that under that frosty coating the cake was stale, he thought.

He drove beside the tracks of the Lebanon & County Railroad and when he came in among the derricks he heard the sigh and creak of wells on the pump here along the margin of the field. Then he saw the lights of Ragtown and he turned into Ranger Street and he had never known it to be so crowded. He saw the flashing sign of Ruby's White Way and the bright doorway where there was no sign, but where two men stood as guards at Jesse Halliday's gambling house. He found a place to park the car, squeezing it in through the mud to the curb, then he crossed the street to the lighted doorway. The guards inspected him as he rapped on the door. A man looked at him through the peephole, then opened the door.

He came into the room and saw the roulette table and Nancy Jo Paige was there. He scowled, and she saw him and came away from the table.

"Cobb, I tried to get you. I thought maybe you'd come here."

"What made you think that?" Cobb looked at the roulette table. "Say, did you come here alone? You mean to tell me that? Damn it, haven't you got any better sense?"

"I only came to find you. I'm safe enough in this place."

Cobb grunted. "Is Jesse around?"

"Oh, you don't want to see Jesse."

"You bet I want to see Jesse. Why in hell do you think I came in here?"

"He's not here."

"I'll wait, then."

"Cobb, are you carrying a gun?"

Cobb smoothed his coat-tails. He grinned at Nancy Jo. "Let's go get us some drinking liquor."

"Cobb, why are you carrying a gun?"

"Hell, it ain't the first time. I've carried a gun before.

I always packed a gun in Borger. What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

She put both her hands on his arm. "Listen, you've had too much to drink. Darling, let's go back to Lebanon."

"Hell, no. I want to see Jesse Halliday."

"But he's not here, Cobb."

"He'll be back."

"Darling, let me have that gun."

He pushed her hands away. "What's the matter with you?" He blinked his eyes to focus and saw how white her face was, how darkly her eyes glowed. Then he laughed. "You afraid I'm going to shoot somebody? By God, that's what you're afraid of."

"Listen, you madman, let's go get some black coffee."

He was still chuckling. "We'll get us something to drink. Come on."

He turned toward the door and saw the man standing there, a thin man with a hard face. "Listen here," Cobb said. "I come here looking for Jesse and I'll be back. You tell him I'll be back." He put one arm around Nancy Jo. "Come on, honey, let's go."

But she drew away from him. "I don't want anything to drink, Cobb, and you've had enough."

He scowled at her. "You coming or not?"

"I'm not."

"You going to stay here?"

"Yes, I am."

Cobb turned and walked out to the street, and the door was closed behind him. He stood on the corner and cursed. He cursed Ragtown and Jesse Halliday and Ruby Dwyer and the Burkburnett Café and he cursed Ragtown by the names of its streets. He cursed Ranger Street and the millions of barrels of crude that had flowed out of the rugged land at Ranger. He cursed Borger Street and the dozen wells he had helped to drill in the Panhandle. He cursed Seminole Street and the dry hole he had drilled in the

Seminole field. He cursed Desdemona Street and Kiefer Street and Bowlegs Street and Hogshooter Street, and then he turned into Hogshooter Street and went to Ruby's White Way.

The dance hall was crowded, and he edged his way into the line of men at the bar. He ordered rye whisky and drank it straight and listened to the man next to him who was talking and to a thin blonde who was singing on the tiny stage. The man was big, but he had soft white hands and he wore a scarab amulet ring that probably had a secret device for marking cards. He had come from East Texas that day, Cobb heard him say, and the thin blonde was singing: *My Daddy rocks me with a steady roll. . . .* He had left Kilgore that morning when the troops came in, the big man said, and he had been on the road all day. It was big out there, the big man said. It was tremendous. They got sixteen hundred and twenty-five producing wells and they claim that in the twenty-four hours before the troops come in they took better than a million barrels out of the ground, but now them wells were shut down tight, the same as in Oklahoma, and the head of the biggest independent company out there had said that all the proclamations and all the troops in the world would not add one cent to the price of oil . . . *with a steady roll.* And the Secretary of the Interior of the United States claimed that it was the most heart-breaking waste of national resources in a generation. Those were his words . . . *My Daddy rocks me when he takes hold,* the thin blonde wailed. . . . But, hell, they were setting fires out there and they burned down some churches in Kilgore and they dynamited some pipelines. The landowners done it. They blowed up the pipelines of those operators who was stealing oil and not paying royalties on it and selling it under cover for five cents and less a barrel. Hot oil. And they was all doing it. *With a steady roll. . . .* They move it out by pipelines buried under the ground and by tank

trucks and sometimes the landowners are in on it. You see, they have these buried lines and they hide the valves and there was one case where they put the valve in the outhouse and whenever a stranger showed up the old lady she always went out to the privy. And you know, the kids boast about it. They go to school and boast and say, at our house we got a by-pass in every room but the parlor. That's the way it is in East Texas. . . . *For my Daddy rocks me with a steady roll*, the thin blonde sang, and her voice bounced like a buggy on a rocky road.

That's the way it is in East Texas, Cobb thought. Out in East Texas they're producing their oil and they ain't taking orders off nobody, anyhow until the troops marched in, but here in Lebanon I'm a damned outcast because I done the same thing. I ain't the only one. It's been going on like that all the time in East Texas and there are hundreds of 'em there, but to stop me doing it they took the company away from me and they got that son of a bitch Halliday to file that suit.

Cobb ordered another drink. The big man still was talking, but the blonde had left the stage. Cobb drank the whisky and pushed himself away from the bar, and someone said, "Hello, there."

Cobb waved one hand. "Hiya, Sue?"

"You gonna be nice tonight?"

"Maybe. You gonna be nice?"

"Now, honey, I'm always nice."

"Nuts," Cobb said, and he staggered to the door and he was out again on Hogshooter Street. A girl walked slowly past him and the big heels of her half-boots dragged a little in the universal invitation of prostitutes.

"Go peddle it someplace else," Cobb said, and he was very drunk. He swayed against the side of the building. He leaned against the boards and shut his eyes and thought, I'm gonna stay sober. I didn't come over here just to get drunk. I come over here to see that son of a bitch Halli-

day and I got to be sober to do that. But damn, I'm drunk. Damn. *Damn!*

He set himself in motion again and he reached the corner and staggered along Ranger Street to the Burkburnett Café. He went in and sat on a stool and ordered black coffee, and then he took his water glass and emptied it on the floor and took the bottle of Worcestershire sauce and poured two ounces of it into the glass and drank it down and reached for his black coffee and gulped it and the sauce was hotter than the coffee. He finished the coffee and ordered another cup and drank it and he felt better. There were no longer great waves of motion in his head.

He's going to tell me who paid him to bring that suit, Cobb thought. It was Good Willie Andrews or it was Ardmore and he's going to tell me. By God, he's going to tell me that. He got paid his hire and he told his lies and now by God he's going to tell me why he done it and who paid him to do it. I got to know that.

Cobb felt sober now. He reached back and touched the pistol in his pocket. He felt the bulge of it through the thin material of the coat. Then he laughed and the counterman came over. He was a sleepy-eyed Greek with the unhurried peace of those who work by night and he took the money from Cobb and watched him stagger out to Ranger Street.

There were no guards at the door, and Cobb knocked. The peephole slid back and he saw the upper part of a hard, thin face. "What do you want, buddy?"

"I want in. What in hell do you think?"

"What do you want in for?"

"I want to see Jesse Halliday. You tell him I'm here. You tell him Cobb Walters is here."

He felt strong hands on each of his shoulders and the two guards were there, holding him. Cobb was angry and

tried to break away, but they held him tightly and his right arm was twisted behind his back.

"You better go on about your business," the man behind the door said. "Show him the way out of Ragtown, boys."

The two men turned Cobb around and one of them asked, "Where's your car, friend?"

Cobb did not answer and the other guard said, "I believe it's that yaller one across the street. I seen it before."

They pushed him across the street and into the car.

"You show your face around here again tonight and there'll be trouble," one of the men said. "Seerious trouble. Now go on home and sober up."

Cobb started the car. The men stepped back in the mud and he put the car in gear and drove along Ranger Street toward the railroad tracks. Now he was angry. His face was hot and his hands were clenched tightly on the steering wheel and he felt the knobby hardness of the gun on his hip.

He turned left on Desdemona Street, drove east for one block, and then turned back toward the north on Burbank Street. He drove three blocks and he was on Hogshooter Street again and he stopped the car at the curb, a hundred feet from Ruby's White Way. What he needed was another drink. He'd have another drink and he'd think up something to outsmart those bastards. If I had 'em one at a time, he thought, if they just came at me one at a time, but that kind go in pairs and they know how to work together.

He got out of the car and when he heard the noise of the motor he stood on the boardwalk rocking back and forth slightly on the balls of his feet. Then he walked on and left the engine running. He went into Ruby Dwyer's place and the smoke was dense in that August night and the sound of voices seemed to roll with the smoke along

the ceiling. The blonde was singing again and the lights were low.

Cobb started forward, toward the bar, and ahead of him he saw Ruby Dwyer standing at a table with her buxom body stuffed into a green dress and her arms and shoulders powdered very white, and he saw her lips move and a man at the table got to his feet and his chair fell back on the floor and he was Jesse Halliday. Cobb could not see his hands and there was a sense of warning in the way Ruby Dwyer stood with her white shoulders bent and the way the room was silent except for the thin blonde singing and the pianist picking out notes like a man counting out pennies and the expression on Jesse's face that Cobb had seen before one night in a hotel room in Oklahoma.

Cobb swung around and jerked out his gun and squeezed the trigger three times. There was terrific noise and Jesse Halliday fell forward on the table with his face down, and in his right hand there was something black and shiny pulling away from his pocket.

Ruby Dwyer stood very still and the music had stopped and the blonde was no longer singing, and in the back of the room there were shouts. But there where Cobb was no one moved and he stood staring at Halliday with the gun in his hand. Then he turned and ran out to the street. He bumped into a girl and she cried out angrily, "Ya bumya, why don't ya . . ." and then she saw the gun in his hand and her voice choked off.

Cobb ran on toward his car and he thanked God he had left the engine running. He jumped in and threw it in gear and the wheels churned as he roared down Hogshooter Street to the corner. He heard shouts behind him and the neon signs flashed by, and then he skidded out of the mud of Ranger Street onto the gravel highway.

He glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw no lights behind him. He was trembling all over and as he turned

a bend the gun slipped along the seat and came to rest against his thigh. And at first he thought, I was quick and I beat him to it. He never got his gun out until it was too late and I bet I hit him with all three shots. But was he drawing before I did or was it later? God damn, I didn't mean to shoot him.

He brought the car around a curve and the gas flares of the oil field were on his right and ahead was the string of lights of Lebanon. He did not know what he was going to do, and he could not think of what was ahead of him, and he thought, I wasn't mad. I wasn't even mad. I didn't mean to shoot him and if he hadn't got up that way and if Ruby Dwyer hadn't stood there with that scared look and if he hadn't reached for his gun I never would have shot him. I just went in there for a drink. I was going to get another rye and then I was going home. It was the way he got up from the table and shoved his chair back and the way it fell on the floor and the way Ruby Dwyer was looking at me. I had to shoot.

Cobb slowed to turn into the public square. He passed the Lebanon House, but he could not stop there. He could not stop and go up to his room and wait there alone for what was to happen. He drove on around the square and turned out of it to the south. He reached Persimmon Street and suddenly he turned off and drove up into the driveway of the Joplin house. He stopped there and sat a moment with the engine still running and the headlamps bright on the door of the garage. He heard a window open upstairs and a voice called, "Who's that?"

He leaned out. "It's me. Cobb. Can you come down a minute?"

"I've gone to bed, Cobb."

"This is important. Please come down a minute."

She murmured something and a light went on in the upstairs window. Cobb switched off the lights of the car. The gun was on the seat beside him, pressing against his

thigh, and he thought, I don't know why I put it in my pocket. I never meant to shoot him. I don't know why I took that gun along, and maybe it was because I wasn't mad and I thought if I got mad I'd want that gun so I put it in my pocket. But I didn't get mad and I didn't mean to shoot him. It was because he pulled a gun on me that night in Tulsa and because of the look on his face that night in Haley's room. He had that same look tonight.

He heard the front door of the house open and close and she came swiftly toward him over the grass, with a kimono wrapped around her. "Cobb, it's midnight. What brings you around so late?"

"Clara," Cobb said, "I just killed a man."

He had not even thought that before. He had thought, I shot him. I shot Jesse Halliday. But he had not thought, I killed a man.

"For God's sake," Clara said. "Are you drunk, Cobb?"

"I'm sober now. Get in a minute."

He pushed open the door and she got in, looking at him intently. Her hair was a pale color in the night.

"What am I going to do?" Cobb said. "I shot Jesse Halliday over in Ragtown."

"Oh, Lord," Clara said.

"I didn't mean to do it. Clara, I wasn't even mad and I went in for a drink and he was there and I shot him." Cobb put the car in reverse and backed out to the street. "I can't just wait here. I got to think. Clara, what ought I to do?"

"But, Cobb, why? *Why?* Oh, Lord, can't you ever keep out of trouble?"

"I guess I can't," Cobb said, and drove away, along Per-simmon Street.

"And why? For heaven's sake, why?"

"I guess because of that suit," Cobb said. "That was it." But he thought, that was no reason to kill a man, and he tried to explain. "They rigged up that suit to take my company away from me and they done it. The bank took over

my company and the way they done it was with that suit and the lies Halliday told."

"And so you *shot* him?" Clara said in a whisper.

"But I didn't mean to. I told you I didn't mean to. Damn it, don't ask me no reasons. I done it and I'm in a hell of a mess and I can't eat it this time. Clara, I thought you could help me out."

"What can I do, Cobb?"

"Nothing," Cobb said.

He drove on outside the city limits on a narrow road lined with sunflowers. Clara considered a long time, and then she asked, "Did anybody see you?"

"Everybody in Ragtown saw me. Everybody in Ruby's White Way."

She expelled a breath that was part a sigh, part a groan.

"If I'd *meant* to shoot him I wouldn't of done it that way," Cobb said. "Don't you see? I was drunk."

"Cobb, you don't need me. You need a lawyer."

He stopped the car, and they were shielded by sunflowers. They were in a lane of sunflowers that were a ghostly gray with dust.

"I know what I got to do," Cobb said. "I got to clear out of here. I'm going to head south."

She drew the kimono more closely around her shoulders. "You have to decide that for yourself, Cobb. Could you get away?"

"I could make it to Mexico. Sure."

"And then what?"

"Christ, I don't know." His voice choked off. "I don't know what to do."

"This car of yours is easy to identify."

"I know it is."

"You can take my car, Cobb."

"Clara, I . . ." Cobb reached out and caught her hand.

"Honey, it's been so long since I've sat and talked to you and I sure have missed you. I was a fool."

"Listen, Cobb, you've got to get busy. You've got to get started, if you're going to Mexico. Have you any money?"

"I've got a few hundred dollars on me."

"That will get you there."

"And I got about forty-five thousand in the bank."

"But can you get that?"

"No."

"Cobb, for heaven's sake, get started. Do you have a road map? You'll have to follow the back roads."

"I don't need a map.—Clara." He gripped her hands. "Honey, why don't you come with me? Listen, you and me. You and me together again. We'll go down to Mexico and we'll have us a time."

"Cobb, you're still drunk," she said sharply.

"No, I'm cold sober. And I mean it. Clara, without you I don't give a damn. But with you, I'll get to Mexico all right. Honey, I'll make it all up to you and I'll . . ."

"Stop it, Cobb," she said, and turned her head away.

He pressed nearer her and the gun wedged against his thigh. "Clara, you and me," he whispered, and put his arm around her. Her shoulders were unyielding.

"I'm going to be married, Cobb. I thought you knew."

Cobb's fingers gripped her shoulder. "To Good Willie Andrews?"

"Yes, to Will Andrews."

"That's no good," he said. "You know that's no good. He ain't the man for you, Clara."

She put up her hands to push his arm away, and his fingers tightened. "Clara, I'm the man for you and you know it." He bent his head and kissed her neck. Both of her hands were against his chest now, pushing him. Cobb felt a glow of strength, of domination. It was as it had been before and this woman was his woman.

"Stop it, Cobb," she whispered. "You know that's all over."

"No, it ain't. Listen here, I love you and you love me."

He pulled her toward him and kissed her cheek. He found her lips and pressed his kiss hard. But she was sobbing and he tried to kiss her eyes. Her fists pushed against his chest and she raised one knee and it was jabbed into his abdomen just above where the gun pressed hard against him. She was whispering, "Damn you, Cobb, damn you."

"You don't mean that. You mean, I love you, Cobb."

"God damn you."

She was sliding away, lower in the seat, and he pressed down upon her. "Say it," he said. "Go ahead, you say it."

"Oh, you bastard. You dirty bastard."

"You say you love me," Cobb said. "You say you're coming away with me. You say you're my woman and you'll always be my woman."

"Bastard, bastard . . ." She sobbed and sank her teeth hard in his hand.

Cobb snatched his hand away. He laughed. "I don't mind those love bites. I know you love me."

"I hate you. Oh, you bastard, I hate you."

Cobb had twisted the kimono off her shoulders and he kissed the soft bare flesh beside her neck; he pressed his face into the warm angle of flesh there.

Her fists beat on his shoulders and her voice rose in a scream and her knee jabbed hard against him, and then there was a hard, leaping motion and a tremendous noise and a sudden acrid smell of smoke. Cobb moved back and picked up the gun by the warm barrel and looked at it. He threw it out of the car, into the sunflowers. Clara drew away from him and sat pressed into the corner of the car, breathing hard.

Cobb's voice was unsteady. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was plain crazy. I been that way all night. Plain crazy."

"Cobb, are *you* hurt?"

"My leg," Cobb said.

"Oh."

"It ain't bad. It don't even hurt."

"It was . . . Was that the gun?"

"Yes."

"Cobb, where is it?"

"Just in the flesh of the leg, I think. It don't hurt."

"Oh, God," Clara said.

He stepped on the starter. It was his left leg that was wounded, but his other leg trembled as he pressed the starter.

Clara leaned forward. "Let me look at it."

"No," Cobb said.

He put the car in gear and felt a hot stab of pain when he stepped on the clutch. He drove a hundred yards to a crossroads where he could turn around. He used his right foot on the clutch and stopped with the handbrake as he backed and turned. There was sweat on his face and Clara said, "Please let me drive."

"No."

He drove on toward town and they came to the city limits and the broad avenue that led to the public square, where the lighted courthouse clock showed that it was half-past twelve.

"You can't go to Mexico like that, Cobb. Let me do something about it. I can make a bandage."

"No."

Cobb turned the corner into Persimmon Street and when he reached the Joplin house he clenched his teeth and pushed in the clutch with his left foot and brought the car to a stop.

"Get out," he said.

She opened the door. "Cobb, I . . ."

"I'm sorry it happened this way," Cobb said. "But get out."

She stepped out on the curb and he gathered his strength and put the car in gear and drove away. He did not see her

standing, with the kimono gathered close around her shoulders, watching the car from sight.

He drove the two blocks to Sycamore Street and turned toward the yellow house where his parents lived. When he stopped he did not use his left leg, but pressed on the brake with his right foot and brought the car to a stop, stalling the engine. He opened the door and got out. His leg throbbed with pain and was so weak that it would not bear his weight. He saw on the floor mat all the blood that he had lost and he turned away and took one step and then he was falling. He put out his hands to break the fall and the curbing struck his abdomen and his left leg was stretched out helplessly behind him. He was in the light of the headlamps and he tried to push himself up but he could not and he dropped his forehead to his sleeve and perspiration soaked into the cloth of his shirt. He closed his eyes and he did not see the lights go on upstairs in his father's room. He did not hear his mother call out to him. . . .

34

THERE was a picture of his father, wearing boots that reached nearly to his knees, wearing pants that were tight around the thighs, and a hickory shirt. Standing with his left foot raised on a tree-stump and holding in his left hand, loosely by the barrel, a light carbine; in the right hand resting just below his hip, a rawhide quirt. His hat was on the back of his head and the background was a painted background of pine trees such as were never seen in that flat country of the Cherokee Strip where the photograph had been taken.

There was an old mahogany bookcase with a glass front and in it there were Indian arrows laid in a row and boxes of arrowheads. Cobb had made bows from the bois d'arc tree and he had copied arrows from the warped shafts in the case and had glued the feathers just so, as were those in the case. They were the arrows of Comanches, who had lit their campfires among these hills, and there were grooves cut along the sides of the shafts to let the blood of the buffalo pass after the arrow had been driven home.

There was a large oval photograph, sepia colored, of his parents soon after their marriage. A mustache here concealed the thin line of his father's lips and there was a high stiff collar around his neck. The eyes had the bold steady gaze of eyes that in old photographs seem to look across the years. In this photograph his mother's ears showed and they were large ears that made her face appear smaller and more thin, so that with her hair pinned up she seemed a schoolgirl. And her eyes had the same far-seeing look, but

there was an inner reflection that was not in his father's eyes, as if her eyes remembered; having looked down from this wall into this room and seen so much, her eyes remembered. They had looked down into this room, upon this bed, when Cobb had been born, and as he now glanced up from this bed at the picture on the wall he must turn his head aside, because he could not meet his mother's eyes in the old photograph. He looked out the window at the familiar pecan trees along Fossil Creek.

When he first saw these things he did not wonder. He opened his eyes and looked at the photograph of his father and the arrows in the bookcase and the other photograph, and then he looked out the window at the trees. And then he remembered, and sat up in bed and called out.

He heard a quick step and his father entered the room. "Son, how are you?"

"I'm fine," Cobb said, and looked away from his father's face. "How did I get here?"

"We brought you, son."

"Where's Mom?"

"She's in town. One of us stays in town all the time."

"Oh," Cobb said.

"And the other stays here with you."

Cobb glanced at his father. "How long is it?"

"Five days now. You've been pretty sick. You bled a lot."

"Yes, I remember."

"You hungry, Cobb?"

"No."

"You better eat something, though. How about some soup?"

"I don't want anything."

"I'll get you some soup."

His father went away and Cobb sank back against the pillow. There were questions he wanted to ask, but he could not ask them. He felt ashamed and he thought of

Jesse Halliday slumped over the table in Ruby Dwyer's place and he thought of Clara, and he winced and struck his fist against the pillow.

Tom Walters returned with a plate of soup and some crackers on a tray. He put the tray on the bureau and lumped the pillows behind Cobb's back, then he set the tray on Cobb's lap.

"Eat it," he said.

Cobb tasted the soup. "I'm surprised they ain't been out here."

"That's why one of us stays in town all the time, son. You go ahead and eat that soup."

"Dad, I— Oh, hell." Cobb dipped his spoon in the soup. As he ate it with the crackers his father sat in a rocking chair beside the bed, silent.

When he had finished Cobb leaned back against the pillows. "Go ahead, Dad. I want to know about it."

"Son, is it true?"

"Yes, it's true."

Tom Walters went on quickly. "When we found you on the curb you babbled about it and we bandaged up your leg and brought you here. Then I went back to town and I took that yaller car of yours and drove it off. I drove until I run out of gas and I left it side of the road down near Waco. Then I come back by train."

"That's good work," Cobb said.

"They found it there and they been hunting for you down south."

Cobb hesitated. He could not meet his father's eyes and he was afraid to ask the question but he had to ask it. He cleared his throat and asked, "Is he dead?"

"Yes, son."

Cobb gave his head a slight shake. "Got a cigarette?"

Tom Walters brought him a cigarette and struck a match. Cobb sucked in the smoke and sighed. "Let's have the rest of it."

"They got an indictment for you and a bench warrant."

"Murder?"

"Murder."

"Dad, I . . ." Cobb blew out smoke. "Dad, I never meant to do it. Dad, I . . ."

"Don't talk about it, son."

"All right," Cobb said. "Dad, I hate to make this trouble for you and Mom. Have they bothered you?"

"They asked a few questions, that's all. It wasn't nothing. Nobody's been out this way and you're safe here. You can lay up until your leg is better and then we'll think of something."

"How is that leg?"

"It's all right. Just the fleshy part of the thigh and it went on through. Ada and me was worried because we didn't want to call a doctor. We was sure worried about you. But we follered the home medicine guide and I reckon it's all right."

"Sure it is. I got more confidence in Mom than I have in doctors."

"Maybe you're talking too much, Cobb. You ought to lay and rest."

"All right." Cobb hesitated. "Dad, have you got a newspaper?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to see it."

Tom Walters carried the tray into the kitchen and returned with a copy of the *Lebanon News*. The dateline was Saturday, August 22. There was a story about Cobb, but it was on the back page and was only three paragraphs long and it said that Cobb Walters was still "at large." Cobb winced and thought that Ed Drum probably had enjoyed writing the story.

"The first day or so it was something," his father said. "We got them papers in town."

Cobb frowned and turned to the front page and the

news was news of oil. The troops were still on duty in the East Texas field and would be there until doomsday, the Governor said, if that was necessary. There had been half a dozen incendiary fires and the sentries in the oil fields carried sawed-off shotguns. One major purchaser had posted a price of sixty-eight cents a barrel, but martial law continued and the wells were shut down.

Lying there in bed with his wounded leg stretched out Cobb had a perspective that had not been his before. He was very remote from it and he could see it more clearly. His disengagement allowed him the luxury of philosophy. He looked at his father and said, "I wish to hell that hole I drilled was dry."

"You didn't wish it then, son."

"No." Cobb dropped the newspaper on the bed. If he had drilled a dry hole, he thought, he would have drifted on, probably to the East Texas field after the Joiner well came in. And Lebanon would be the same quiet town it had always been, a peaceful county seat.

"Anyhow, I got this farm back for you and Mom," Cobb said. "I done that and I'm satisfied."

"We could have made out on the Simmons place, Cobb."

"Maybe so."

But the boom had come and Lebanon would never be the same. The town had accepted Ragtown and oil and eyebrows were not raised at things that would have shocked the town only a year ago. Was it only a year ago?

Cobb thought of that night when old Abernathy had come to fetch him in a rainstorm and they had driven to the hillside where oil flowed wild out of the hole he had drilled into the earth. He had been crazy from it, crazy the way he was that night in Ruby Dwyer's place.

"Dad, where is that well they're drilling on this farm?"

"Over in the northwest corner."

"I hope they make an oil well."

"I'd just as soon it was dry. We got all we want, Ada and me. More than we ever hoped to have."

That set Cobb to remembering that his father held the original patent on this quarter section. He was the first man who could call this land his own, and the crops it bore, and the oil that might have accumulated deep down below.

"It's a funny thing," Cobb said. "A year ago I was trying to get hold of money just to eat and clothe myself, but after that I never had to worry about food and clothes and it was just money I was after. Just oil and money."

"This here oil is a curse," Tom Walters said. "I tell you, Cobb, it's a curse. When it comes so a man can't keep his eyes on his plow and goes hog-wild and forgets that good land is for farming, then it sure is a curse."

"You put your finger on it there, Dad. It's a curse on the men that go after it because of the way they do it. Oil ain't evil, but I guess men are. I guess I was."

And he thought, I played fast and loose with it, and I played fast and loose with everything. Oil turned everything upside down and it made me reckless. I didn't give a damn. Just get that oil up and sell it and make mine, that's all I thought about.

"Dad, I been thinking," Cobb said. "I was raised a farmer. I helped you plow this land and plant crops and harvest 'em, and we learned how to rotate our crops so as not to destroy the fertility of the soil, and we learned to put down fertilizer and we learned to plow around the contour of a hillside instead of up and down it, so the water wouldn't run off and carry topsoil with it. It took us a long time to learn that, and we learned it the hard way, and it's true it's just the beginning of it. But it had to come. Famine and hunger taught it to us and to people before us. We learned it the hard way because it was that or starve."

"That's right," Tom Walters said.

"But we ain't going to starve for oil," Cobb said. "Maybe

our grandsons will. Maybe our great-grandsons will. Maybe everything will go to pot again because they run out of oil. But not us. There's oil for us and we take it up and sell it and we waste it the way we'd never waste our harvest or the topsoil off our farms. The trouble is we been trained the hard way to conserve the topsoil, but that's where our responsibility ends, at the topsoil. Listen here, would I go out and chop down that pecan tree out there to get me one year's harvest of pecans in a hurry? Hell, no. But I'd waste Christ knows how much gas to get up my oil as fast as I could. I'd waste the gas that brings the oil up. I'd waste a harvest of oil just to get as much up as fast as I could and sell it and get mine. And so would every other oil man you ever heard of." Cobb chuckled. "Except now the price is so low it ain't worth while and I guess the price is the only check there is. They sent the troops in because of the price and that's what they call conservation, Dad. Conservation comes in the back door while the folks are putting out the welcome mat in front for a higher price."

Cobb lay back against the pillows and he thought that for him it had been a matter of luck. He had believed in his luck and he had followed his luck and oil was just a freak of nature down there in the rock. It wasn't a solemn thing like farming land. There was no stability in it. He had wanted to get his and he got it.

Cobb closed his eyes and Tom Walters, thinking he was asleep, went away. But Cobb was not asleep. He was thinking. Thinking that when a man thought of the earth he thought of the surface of the earth and the richness of the soil and how much cotton or wheat or oats or peanuts it would yield to the acre. It was this surface of the earth that man had always wanted, and he had learned to protect it from waste and depletion. Drought and erosion and famine had taught him the lessons of conservation and crop rotation. And because man had wanted forty acres that he could call his own, where he could raise his crops, he had

asserted ownership; and because he had liked the fold of a hill or the nestling line of a creek, and had thought the soil was good, he had acquired it, and with it he had acquired the right of ownership to whatever might lie beneath the surface of the land. And if it was oil it came to him out of the mysteries, a rich and generous gift, and he took it up and sold it and there was no compelling reason for its conservation. There was no lesson of drought and erosion and famine. The oil rushed up and the surface of the land, which had yielded generously through the years, no longer satisfied. The booms came, and values changed, and the stern morals that were handed on from generation to generation with the lessons taught by drought and erosion and famine no longer applied and those lessons now were academic. Academic for this generation. The oil flowed up and brought riches that the surface of the land had not yielded through generations of patient husbandry, and men scrambled and fought for oil and they went on from field to field in the wild, zestful search for oil, and it was a great game of chance and luck.

Lying in the room where he was born, with his eyes closed, Cobb thought that what he wanted now was a quarter section of land such as this and peace for farming it. He wanted the spring thundershowers and a good roof against them; he wanted the summer warmth when the cotton was in bloom and the late falls when the bolls ripened and the fields were white. He wanted the quick frost that followed autumn rains and turned the trees in bright colors, when they went with cane poles to knock the pecans out of the trees. He wanted good stock and good equipment and black soil and soft water and he wanted a strong wife who would bear him seven sons. A quarter section, a family, and the seasons to follow in their order as sweet as a memory and sweeter than a dream. This was what he wanted.

Tom Walters came quickly into the room, calling, "Cobb!"

"Yes?"

"Wake up, son. There's somebody coming. I saw 'em turn off the road."

Cobb threw back the covers and his father ran to a closet, returned with a pair of crutches. Cobb put them under his arms, and his father helped him up. For a moment he was weak and dizzy, then his head cleared.

"How does that leg feel?"

"I don't even feel it."

"Can you make it out to the smokehouse?"

"Sure."

His father held the door for him and Cobb made his way over the uneven ground to the smokehouse. Here the walls were blackened and there was a pungent smell from the hams that had been smoked. There was a crack through which Cobb watched his father go back to the house and climb to the porch. Then he heard voices and one was his father's voice and the other was a woman's voice.

Then he saw the woman and she was Nancy Jo Paige. Cobb grinned and got the door open and came out into the grass on his crutches, calling, "Hey, there."

"Cobb!" Nancy Jo saw him and ran down the steps.

He stood grinning at her, then his lips tightened. "How did you happen to come out here?"

"It was just a hunch. But I never expected to find you."

"If you had that hunch you're liable not to be the only one," Cobb said, and looked across at his father.

"Cobb, what's the matter with your leg?"

"Nothing. It's just a flesh wound."

"It—it happened that night?"

"Yes."

"You better come back in the house, son," Tom Walters said. "He's pretty weak, Miss."

"I'm strong as a prize bull," Cobb said. "I'm all right."

"Cobb," Nancy Jo said. "Oh, Cobb, why wouldn't you listen to me? Why wouldn't you come home with me?"

"I was a damned fool," Cobb said. "That's all."

His father helped him up the steps and into the bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed, with the crutches beside him.

"Cobb, I tried to stop you," Nancy Jo said. "And I looked for you. I waited a long time and I looked for you. I went to Ruby's place."

"I was there."

"You'd been there. You'd gone already. And I went back to Halliday's and they told me you'd gone back to town and Jesse went out and so I came on back to Lebanon and I didn't know until the next day. Darling, I can't help feeling it's my fault."

"Your fault I was crazy in the head? What a notion!"

"My fault I didn't stop you."

Cobb shook his head. "Let's not talk about it." He turned to his father. "Dad, I've done some thinking. Out there in the smokehouse when it might of been the sheriff coming I done some thinking. It's too big a risk."

"Son, we can fix up a place for you down on the creek if you're scared."

"I'm worried about you and Mom. Nancy Jo thought of it and she won't be the only one. They'll be out here, Dad, sooner or later. Soon as they find my trail down south is cold."

"We'll stall 'em off, if they do."

"No," Cobb said. "The best thing I can do is give myself up."

"No, Cobb!" Nancy Jo cried.

Tom Walters did not speak and Cobb smiled at Nancy Jo. "It's the only thing to do and I know it and Dad knows it. Nancy Jo, I'm going to ask you to take me to town."

"Oh, I can't. Cobb, I couldn't do that."

"Listen here." Cobb's smile widened. "You think I'm a fool. I'll get out of this."

"You think you can?"

"I know I can."

Nancy Jo glanced at Tom Walters and saw his nod.

"Just step out on the porch while I get my clothes on," Cobb said.

"Son, I can take you to town."

"No. I want you to keep out of this, Dad."

Tom Walters helped Cobb on with his shirt and pants, saying, "I knew you'd have to come around to it, son. You'll have to face the music. You think you can get out of it?"

"Sure I can."

"How is that?"

"Self-defense. Halliday shot me first. He nicked me in the leg."

"Oh. I didn't know that was the way it was."

"That's the way it was."

Tom Walters patted his son's shoulder. "Me and Ada will be in to see you. I reckon you'll be in the county jail?"

"I reckon so," Cobb said.

He put his weight on the crutches and hobbled out to Nancy Jo's car. He sat with his body swung around to ease his leg, and the girl drove slowly over the rough ground along the creek, past the outcrop of limestone on the bluff.

"Cobb, I've been over it and over it. Please say it's not my fault again."

"Of course it's not your fault."

"Because I'd have done anything, *anything* to stop you. Cobb, you know that."

"I believe it."

"What can I do now, Cobb?"

"Just drive me to town. That's enough."

"To the, to the . . . Cobb, to the jail?"

"No. To Oliver Wade's office. I got to see my lawyer first."

They reached the public square and Cobb sat far back,

so that he would not be recognized. Nancy Jo stopped the car at the curb, beside the exterior stairs that led to Oliver Wade's office.

"Maybe you'd better ask him to come down," Cobb said. "I don't know if I can make them stairs."

Nancy Jo got out and ran quickly up the steps. A moment later she returned with Oliver Wade. He came up to the car, a frown on his gray face.

"Hello, Oliver."

"Cobb, I'm sorry to see you in such a mess of trouble."

"I want you to get me out of it."

Oliver shrugged his shoulders heavily. "I'll do my best, but it doesn't look so good. I don't know what defense we can use."

"Hell, I'm on crutches now from a bullet in my leg. I'm going to plead self-defense."

Oliver sucked in his breath and looked at Cobb closely. "You want to claim he shot you first?"

"That's just what happened. He nicked me in the leg and then I let him have it."

Oliver looked at Nancy Jo and there was something in both their eyes that made Cobb stiffen.

"Jupiter, Cobb, didn't you know?" Oliver Wade said. "Halliday's gun wasn't loaded."

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I WOUND my hand in her dark brown hair and drug her round and round. . . . Cobb turned over and pressed his face into the striped ticking that covered his pillow, listening to the deep voice of Nellie Barton, the jail matron, in the kitchen at the end of the corridor. I drug her down to the waterside and throwed her in to drown. . . .

Cobb turned over again, on his back, and stared up at the ceiling. Then he got up from the bed and went to the small, barred window. He could bear his weight on his left leg now, but he still limped. After two weeks in this jail cell the occasional twinges of pain were a consolation.

From the window he could see the tracks of the Lebanon & County Railroad at the foot of the slope, and he saw the land rising beyond to the series of low hills where the oil derricks were. He clasped his hands on the cool bars and stood looking at the derricks.

The jail matron sang at her work in the kitchen, where she was preparing the daily supper which would be, again, pinto beans and turnip greens and beef stew and hot biscuits with sorghum molasses for sweetening. She had sung *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*, and *Almost Persuaded Now to Believe*, and when she sang a ballad, such as she was singing now, a doleful whining came into her voice.

Cobb had a cot in his cell and a mattress and pillow covered with faded ticking, and a blanket. There was a small table where he kept his shaving things and the crude brown soap given him for washing clothes. There were pegs on the wall where he hung his clothes and there was

a washbowl and pitcher and he had cigarettes and magazines that Nancy Jo Paige had brought him, cookies that his mother had baked, and a pint of whisky that his father had smuggled in to him. He kept the bottle under his mattress.

Nancy Jo had come once to see him, and there in the small visitors' room he had asked her not to come again. He wanted no one to visit him. He wanted to shut himself up, here in the county jail, in seclusion from the world, in a readjustment of his life that closed a circle tightly around him. He did not want it broken through to expose this small inner life he had, a life he tried to insulate for these few days and weeks against emotion.

"Cobb," Nancy Jo had said. "You can still plead self-defense. Can't you still plead self-defense, whether there were bullets in his gun or not?"

"Sure I can, Nancy Jo. There ain't a state in the Union gives a man as many excuses for homicide as the state of Texas. I've talked it over with Oliver Wade. For one thing I can plead insanity by reason of intoxication, and in Texas you can get away with that, under the law."

"Oh, yes," Nancy Jo cried. "I can testify to that, Cobb. Oh, you were drunk. You *were* insane."

"Yes, I was. But you're not going to testify. I won't let Oliver Wade put you on the stand, so get that through your head. Anyhow, that may not be my plea. It makes no difference whether he had bullets in his gun. He had a gun, and everybody knew it, and he reached for it and I shot him. You can shoot an unarmed man who was reaching for his handkerchief and claim you thought he was reaching for a gun. That's what old Bowman Devant did a long time back, and he got away with it. So don't you worry about me."

"I'm not worried," Nancy Jo had said in a small voice, her eyes downcast.

"There's another thing," Cobb had said hopefully.

"There's cooling time. If a man shoots somebody before he's had a chance to cool off after an injury he can use that as a defense. But if he waits beyond the cooling time they call it murder. Well, I never cooled off and everybody knows that."

Nancy Jo had gone and left him to think about these things, and in two weeks he had tried his case a hundred times. Standing now at the window he looked out at the derricks of the Lebanon field where crude oil was bringing sixty-eight cents a barrel. The big flush wells in East Texas still were shut down and the Oklahoma fields were shut down and crude was sixty-eight cents a barrel in the Lebanon field. In East Texas spokesmen for those opposed to proration were comparing martial law to carpet-bagger rule in the five dark years of Reconstruction in Texas, but the national production of crude oil had decreased by more than eight hundred thousand barrels a day.

Sam McKim, the jailer, came along the corridor, and Cobb did not hear him until the key turned in the lock.

"You got a visitor, Mr. Walters."

"Who is it?" Cobb frowned.

"Gives the name of Sanderson Lake."

"Oh, sure," Cobb said.

He walked along the corridor beside the jailer.

"You know, Mr. Walters," Sam McKim said, "I had a little proposition made to me to go in on a syndicate and drill a well. I can get a five-acre share in it for a couple of thousand dollars."

"Where is the lease?"

"In the old railroad survey, there east of Fossil Creek. I'd say four miles northeast of Ragtown."

Cobb shook his head. "Keep your money, Sam."

In the visitors' room Sandy Lake was waiting by the barred window. He grinned at Cobb.

"Well, you crusty old devil," Cobb said. "I'm glad to see you."

Sam McKim locked them in and waited outside.

"Brought you some cigarettes, Cobb," Sandy said. "Don't recall what brand you smoke."

"That's my brand. Thanks."

They looked at each other, but only Cobb was smiling.

"And here's a copy of the *Lebanon News*," Sandy said. "Just came out."

Cobb took the newspaper.

"I got some news that ain't in the paper," Sandy said. "I don't know as you're going to like it."

"I'm used to that. What is it, Sandy?"

"Well, I'm out of a job."

Cobb studied the old driller's face. "Go ahead."

"They sold out to the Trading Post Oil Company."

"Sold out my stock?"

"Sold the whole works, Cobb."

Cobb opened one of the packs of cigarettes Sandy had brought him, and his hands were steady. "You know what they got for it?"

"They say three million bucks."

Cobb struck a match and lit his cigarette.

"They say the contract calls for a half million spot cash and another half million at the end of a year and two million out of the first quarter of the oil produced."

"So that's that," Cobb said.

"That's a little under two thousand dollars an acre, counting just the proven stuff."

Cobb nodded. "And they fired you, Sandy?"

"They let me go. End of the month."

Cobb dropped his cigarette on the floor and crushed it with his toe. His hands were clenched. "Don't let that worry you, Sandy. I'm going to take it to court and I'll get my equity in that stock. And, anyhow, I got money in the bank. When I get out of here . . ."

He hesitated, seeing the expression of Sandy's face. "Is that what they're saying?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well, what are they saying?"

"They claim the company could have sold out for more if they waited."

"You know what I'm talking about, Sandy."

The old driller shrugged his shoulders. "Well, the odds are against you."

"You mean they're making book?" Cobb's cheek muscles twitched and his smile twisted to one side. "I might take a little of that." But now his hands were trembling and he took out another cigarette and lit it. "I'll get out, Sandy. God damn it, you'll see. It was self-defense and I'll prove it. I'll . . ."

Sam McKim rapped on the door. "Time is up, Mr. Walters. I got work to do."

"Sure you'll get out, Cobb," Sandy said. "I'm going to take a little of that money myself. I oughtn't to mentioned it."

"I'm glad you did."

Sam McKim opened the door.

"And when you're out, boy," Sandy said, "we'll take and get us a nice lease some place, you and me, and . . ."

"You bet," Cobb said. "You bet we will."

And then he turned away and walked back along the corridor and waited, leaning against the cell door, for Sam McKim to open it. He went to his cot and sat down and put his head in his hands.

He had let the newspaper fall to the floor and the headline was that martial law had been lifted in East Texas. After nineteen days the wells would be reopened and the allowable would be two hundred and twenty-five barrels per well, and the troops were marching out except for a skeleton force to assist in the enforcement of proration.

He saw those tall rotary rigs in East Texas, two thousand of them now, and with a vast area of proven acreage yet to be drilled. Along the course of that ancient shoreline,

more than fifty miles long, they would drill a thousand new wells a month, big flush wells where you turned a valve and they flowed from five to twenty thousand barrels a day. But restricted now to two hundred and twenty-five barrels. It was something big over there, Cobb thought, and he was outside it. He had always been outside. But when the Abernathy well came in he had been sitting on top, he thought. There wasn't anything I couldn't do, he thought. I was going to be the biggest oil man yet with my own refinery and Cobbco gas and a string of filling stations. My luck was strong and nothing could turn it then. . . . And maybe it would have come about. The big men in the oil business never had nothing like proration to check them. They had nothing like East Texas. Where would they be? Where would John D. Rockefeller be if they'd prorated Pennsylvania and East Texas had come along then? God knows I was a damn fool, but damned fools like me have done a lot. We take the chances. There wouldn't be any oil if it wasn't for fools like me. We drill the holes where geologists say there ain't any oil and we keep the wheels rolling and the ships on the sea. Any man who drills a wildcat well is a damned fool, but look what the wildcatters done. Look what we done. Look at old Colonel Drake and old man Lucas and Oil City and Spindletop. Look at Bartlesville and the Glenn Pool and Ranger and Desdemona. And look at Lebanon. I done that. If I just hadn't pushed my luck too hard . . .

He remembered the medicine man and put his hand in his pocket. He had always carried it with him since that night in Oklahoma when John Redbird had given it to him, that night when he had lost a dollar eighty playing knock rummy with John and Rosie Redbird. That money had been important to him, because it was meals in a restaurant, it was clothing for his body. It was more important than the three million dollars paid for the Cobb Walters

Oil Company, which was only emotionally important. He had plenty of money left. He would always eat.

He sat looking at the colored beads of the medicine man and the two rabbit's feet dangling. One of them was loose and hanging by a single thread, and the fur was greasy and slicked down. It was greasy and stained from the first oil he had brought up, that first dawn when he had put his hands in it, when he had waded in it with one shoe missing, when he had thought that nothing could stop him then.

He saw a headline on the front page of the newspaper: *Fall Term Set*, and he read: *The fall term will open next Monday, the seventh of September*, and his eyes skimmed down the column until he found what he was looking for. *The first degree murder indictment against Cobb Walters, charged with the shooting of Jesse Halliday in Devant on August 17, has been set down for trial on Monday, the fourteenth. . . .*

Monday, the fourteenth of September, 1931. Ten days. For the first time Cobb was frightened. His forehead and upper lip suddenly were wet with sweat and he tried to think of the other prisoners who were awaiting trial and to put himself with them and to take comfort from them. There was old Bob Daniel, charged with drunken driving. He could get a year for that, but probably sentence would be suspended and he would be left free to spend his money made from oil. And there were three Negroes, charged with shoplifting, and a man and woman who had made a purchase in the Red Front Emporium and given a check in payment and taken change, and when they were arrested the police found checkbooks in their car, checkbooks of the Lebanon National Bank, of Fort Worth banks and Denver banks and Oklahoma City banks, and they were wanted in Fort Worth and Oklahoma City and Denver. Cobb speculated on their chances, and the chances of the three Negroes, and then he thought of what the speculation was in his case and that they were making book and

that the odds were against him. Sandy hadn't said what the odds were. Six to five, maybe. Or two to one. Three to one? Cobb shivered.

They were thinking: His head was bigger than a prize mushmelon ever since he drilled that Abernathy well. He thought he owned this town and the way he laid out money it was a caution. Forty thousand bucks for a house, they say, and he built it out of petrified wood. Damnedest thing you ever seen. And drink! Jesus, that man would pour it down. I've seen him over to Ragtown. I've seen him out to Jack Vibart's. I've seen him right here on the public square, rolling drunk. The one place I never seen him was in church, but I believe if the preacher sold whisky he'd be around. If it was whisky and a blonde singing instead of hymns he'd be around. He was in a fight in Ragtown once before, over at Ruby's White Way. Did you hear about that one? And then he had this oil company and he called it the Cobb Walters Oil Company. Some of us put some money into it and we thought it was going to be the Lebanon Gas and Oil Company. And he wouldn't listen to nobody. If he'd been left free we'd of had the troops in here, too, same as they did in East Texas. And you know what that feller did? I heard about it. He wanted a lease on that Lord's Adopted tract and by God if he didn't go down there to meeting and make out like he'd got religion and he went up and shook the preacher's hand and then he signed 'em up and drilled that well. You remember, they caught him running hot oil there and they dug up his by-pass. And you take this murder charge. Don't tell me that poker game wasn't crooked when he won them leases. He beat that suit, but you can't tell me he didn't run in a cold deck. But that's the funny thing about human nature. He hated the guts of this Jesse Halliday, because Halliday was the guy he cheated of them leases. It was burning in him. And looky, he had borrowed a big lump off the Lebanon National and he wouldn't pay

up. It looked like he was going to lose that suit and you can bet he had a guilty conscience about that and so he decided the bank could keep that no-good collateral and whistle for the money. But what happens? He wins the suit and the bank has already got his stock and he's left out in the cold and he's so mad he wants to shoot somebody. But you notice he didn't go after Ardmore Devant. Oh, no, but maybe he would have. Maybe he was after 'em both. But first off he went after this guy Halliday and that's because of human nature, like I said. That's because he had this guilty conscience so he blamed it all on Halliday and he went over to rub him out and to rub that guilty conscience out. You see how it is? And looky, don't tell me that murder wasn't premeditated. Did you ever hear of Walters carrying a gun before? Hell, no. He got tanked up and he strapped on his gun and he went over to Ragtown and he went gunning for Halliday and the guards there tried to run him out of town. But he came back and he laid for Jesse and when he caught up with him in Ruby's place he shot him down. And then he hid out for five days and he couldn't make a get-away because he had a wound in his leg so he made a big show of walking in and surrendering like an innocent man. Three to one? Hell, I'll give five to one that bastard's neck will stretch!

Cobb was afraid. On an inside page of the *Lebanon News* were listed the names of the talesmen drawn that fall, and he read them over. He saw names he knew, the names of men his father knew. From Lebanon, from other communities in the county. And thinking of them, he was afraid. Some of them did not drink. Most of them kept their best clothes for Sunday. A few had struck oil on their land; most of them had not. Most of them were harvesting their crops that fall, and the cotton would be ripe for picking when Cobb went to trial. Most of them had watched their plows and turned the black earth and planted their crops and sold their corn and wheat and oats and

baled their hay and peddled their fruit in the courthouse square, and they had sold Bermuda onions at five cents for three pounds, peaches for thirty cents a bushel, cantaloupe at three for a nickel. They had tended their crops and watched the oil pour out of the ground on farms that belonged to other men. They had seen Cobb's yellow car and his house of petrified wood and the derricks he had built and the wells he had drilled. Thinking of them, Cobb was afraid.

He let the newspaper fall to the floor, and he thought, I didn't want to kill anybody and I don't know why I put that gun in my pocket. I don't know why I went to Ragtown. Yes, I went there to see Jesse Halliday but all I wanted was to ask him was it Ardmore Devant or was it Will Andrews? Who paid him to bring that suit, that's all I wanted to know. I never meant to shoot him. I never meant to kill anybody. Now it was this way . . . I was in my room and Jan came there . . . and we drank some drinks and we were friends and it wasn't that . . . And when she left I washed my face and I picked up the gun and put it in my pocket . . . and then I drove to Ragtown and I went to Halliday's and Nancy Jo was there and she thought because I had the gun I was going to shoot him and it made me laugh. . . . And then I went to Ruby's . . . and I had some drinks . . . and then I drunk some black coffee at the Burkburnett and those guards grabbed me and took me to my car . . . and in between something must of happened to make 'em do that . . . but it wasn't me and it wasn't anything I done or said. . . . All I said was I was coming back to see Jesse. . . . But of course I had that gun where it was plain to see and that must have been it. . . . So they put me in the car and I drove around the block and I come back to Ruby's place and I left the engine running. . . . Why did I do that? Why did I leave that engine running? . . . And then I walked into Ruby's

and I saw her white shoulders and I saw him getting up from the chair and I heard the chair fall and there was something about it. . . . I knew something was going to happen like that night in Tulsa and it had better be me first and then the gun was out in front of me and I squeezed the trigger and he fell over the table and I stood looking at him and how did I feel? . . . I felt satisfied. . . . Yes, I felt satisfied. That was the first thing I felt. . . . But I wasn't mad. I wasn't even mad.

Cobb jumped up from the cot and lit a cigarette and snapped the burnt match out through the bars. It was clear to Cobb, but he thought, how am I going to tell that story in court and how are they going to take it? But they got to believe me. They got to believe I wasn't mad and that I was crazy drunk and I didn't know what I was doing.

Cobb heard the noise of a broom in the corridor and he turned and walked slowly to the door. He leaned against it, looking out through the bars, and watched Sam McKim in the corridor, coming slowly toward him. There was a tight feeling in Cobb's throat and he waited until Sam had come abreast of the door, and then he said in a low tone, "Sam, I want to ask you something."

"Okay."

"Sam, where do they hang 'em here?"

"Oh, we don't do any of that." Sam McKim leaned on the broom. "We send 'em down to the State Prison at Huntsville, and anyhow it's electrocution now. The electric chair. You know, it was my uncle performed the last hanging in Lebanon County. He was the sheriff, and I remember the old man used to worry about it. He didn't like it at all, but just the same he was kind of proud that he'd fixed up a good noose and it worked the first time. . . ." He broke off at the sight of Cobb's face. "Oh, say!"

"That's all right," Cobb said. "Thanks."

He returned to his cot and sat down and he tried not to

think of old Sheriff McKim figuring how to make a hangman's noose and testing it out and worried about whether it would work and sad afterwards yet pleased that it had worked, and suddenly he thought: Do we leave fear behind us when we die?

36

THE stairs in the Lebanon courthouse creaked, the floors squeaked, and it was a place of stale odors and a mustiness that clogged the nostrils. Not since the limestone walls had been erected and steel beams laid to support the clock tower, not since the opening of the building in 1897, when a senator had made the dedicatory address, had there been repairs to the interior. The mahogany finish on the judge's bench was worn thin and the wood showed whitish at the corners. The chairs in the jurybox squeaked at the slightest motion, and the defense table, where Cobb sat, was indented with lines and circles and initials made by pencil points through the years.

There had been a time, before the motion picture and the radio, when this building had been the center of the social life of Lebanon County. In the old days men had come here when court was in session to hear the speeches, and a lawyer made his mark by his oratory. The taking of evidence had been an incidental to the spectators, who had come to hear the summations. Oliver Wade had made his reputation in those days, and his opening address to the jury was made in fine style, because this Monday afternoon in mid-September he had an audience that filled the courtroom and overflowed into the corridor. The doors of the courtroom had been left open so that all might hear.

For the first time there was a section for the press in the courtroom, and reporters from city newspapers were there. And for the first time in many years Amelia Drum had left the office of the *Lebanon News* and sat with her son a little

ahead of the press section, facing Judge Hatcher and the witness box.

When Cobb had entered the courtroom, blinded by flashbulbs in the corridor, he had been aware of so many people staring at him as he had never been stared at before that he kept his eyes fixed on the judge's bench and did not turn around thereafter. He sat in silence as Alben Bell, the district attorney, began the presentation of evidence, and Oliver Wade sat beside him at the defense table, drawing tic-tac-toe marks on a pad of yellow paper.

The first witness was Dr. Higby, the coroner, who testified that he had examined Jesse Halliday's body in Ruby's White Way in the town of Devant, County of Lebanon, in the early morning of the eighteenth of August. He described the course of two bullets which had struck Halliday, one in the left side of the chest, one in the abdomen, and stated that the first wound was the cause of death. Then Sheriff Williams was called, and was handed a small black revolver by Alben Bell. He identified it as the gun he had found clutched in the hand of the deceased, and said that it had been unloaded and undischarged.

The gun was offered and received in evidence without objection and Cobb watched the clerk affix a tag to it and announce it as Prosecution Exhibit Number 1, and he thought, if I'd known it then I'd be in Mexico now. I could have made it, even on crutches the way I was, and when I got down there I could of found work in those Mexican oil fields and right now I'd be drilling a well. Drilling in one of those big wells they got down yonder.

Next there was a small boy, and he was frightened and his voice stuck in his throat. When he talked he talked only to Judge Hatcher, and he said that he'd been walking along the road and he had seen something shiny in among the sunflowers and had pulled it out and it was a gun and his pop made him give it to the sheriff.

The gun was marked for identification and it was Cobb's

detective special .32 caliber revolver with the nickel-plated handle. Then Richard McWilliams, the hardware dealer, was called to the stand and referred to records and testified that the gun was purchased from him by Cobb Walters on the sixteenth of February, last.

Prosecution Exhibit Number 2. The gun was tagged and Alben Bell passed it to the jury for examination, warning that it be handled with care since there were still two bullets in the chambers. There was only the faintest stress on the word, but it was made clear and important that four cartridges had been discharged.

The earlier testimony was for the record, to establish corpus delicti and the cause of death and the instrument of death, and then there was a stir and there were murmurs of satisfaction and anticipatory grins as Ruby Dwyer came to the witness stand and was sworn and settled herself in the chair and smiled at Alben Bell.

Cobb thought that if you operate a brothel and have paid a few fines in your day and have served a little time, in your day, and a man is murdered in your place and you are called as a witness at the trial, the question of what you will wear and how you will comport yourself requires careful attention. Ruby Dwyer had thought about it. She wore a divided skirt of dark brown and high-heeled brown half-boots with red stars. She wore a pale green shirt with black slash pockets and a yellow handkerchief fastened at her neck with a leather clasp in which there was turquoise, and she wore a brown suède jacket, fringed, and a brown hat with a low, flat crown and a wide brim. The costume enhanced the robustness of her nature, and if her tongue slipped it would not be out of character and if her face showed too much rouge she looked like a rare old trouser and not like the madam of a brothel.

"Now, Miss Dwyer," said Alben Bell. "You run a place of business in the town of Devant, do you not?"

There were a few undisciplined chuckles from the back

of the courtroom, and Judge Hatcher flicked his eyes in that direction, then looked at the witness.

"Yes," Ruby Dwyer replied in a deep voice. "My place is on Hogshooter Street. Ruby's White Way is the name of it."

"Are you acquainted with the defendant, Cobb Walters?"

"Sure I am." Ruby gave Cobb her generous, burlesque-circuit smile, and again there were chuckles. Judge Hatcher reached for his gavel, picked it up, and then began studying the inscription on it. It was made of California redwood and was a present from the Rotary Club in token of a fine attendance record.

"Did you see the defendant on the night of the seventeenth of August or early in the morning of the eighteenth?"

"Sure I did. He was in my place twice. Once about eleven and the second time a little before midnight. He was standing at the bar the first time and I went over and said hello."

"And what did he say?"

"He just gave me a fishy look. He didn't say nothing."

Oliver Wade drew on his yellow pad a small picture of a fish, then drew a circle around the fish and appended a series of exclamation points. Alben Bell was taking Ruby Dwyer over the ground between the time Cobb Walters had left Ruby's White Way and the time he had returned soon before midnight. About twenty to twelve Jesse Halliday had come in, Ruby Dwyer said.

"I found him a table and he sat down and ordered something to—some refreshments." She glanced at the judge.

"Did you sit with him?"

"Yes, me and a girl who works for me."

"What's her name?"

"Sue."

"Her full name, please."

Ruby knit her brows. "I don't remember it offhand."

"All right," Alben Bell said quickly. "Did you carry on a conversation with Jesse Halliday?"

"Sure, we talked."

"What was the subject of your conversation?"

Ruby shrugged. "Oh, we just talked. He laughed a lot and had a few drinks."

"You say he laughed a lot. Why was that?"

"It was because of the way they got rid of Cobb Walters."

Oliver Wade was on his feet. "Now, your Honor, we object to that," he said with a sour look at Alben Bell. "We . . ."

"I'll strike it out," Judge Hatcher said, and sighed, and instructed the jury to disregard the answer.

Cobb sat thinking, what difference does it make? They got rid of me, all right, or they tried to, and I don't wonder Jesse Halliday sat in Ruby's place and laughed about it.

But Alben Bell had to go over it again, and develop it through what Jesse Halliday had said, and Ruby testified that he had laughed and told her: "You should of seen the way my boys took care of Cobb Walters, Ruby. He came in looking for me and he had a gun on him. You could see it plain on his hip. And he asked to see me and the boys told him I was out. He went away, but he come back later and they tapped him on the shoulder and walked him over to his car and sent him high-tailing out of Ragtown."

"Then it was his impression that Cobb Walters had left Devant that night?"

"That's what he said."

"And so he then went to your place?"

"Yes, he did."

"And you had a talk, there at a table with a girl named Sue, and then what happened?"

"Then Cobb Walters came in."

"Go ahead. Tell the jury about it."

"I looked up and I seen him at the door. I seen him look at Jesse and I got up and then Jesse seen him and he jumped up and knocked his chair over and then I seen a gun in Cobb Walters' hand and I heard three or four shots and Jesse fell over on his face and Walters stood looking at him a minute and then he turned and run out the door."

It was the way she stood up, Cobb thought. It was the way her shoulders showed so white and still and the sound that chair made when it fell over. I knew something was going to happen and I had to shoot first. But I didn't run out the door. I just turned and walked out and I wasn't even thinking about getting away. I didn't know I'd killed him and I hadn't thought about it that way. All I was thinking was I'd beat him to it and I swear that's all I was thinking. . . .

As he began his cross-examination Oliver Wade looked at the drawing of a fish on his yellow pad. "Now, Miss Dwyer, you testified that when you saw Mr. Walters in your saloon about eleven o'clock he gave you a fishy look."

"That's right. He sure did."

"Now, I'm a musty old lawyer and I don't believe I've heard that expression in a court of law. Miss Dwyer, what exactly is a fishy look?"

Ruby smiled. "That's a tough one. Just like a fish, I guess. Sort of shiny around the eyes and his mouth open a little. Just like a fish. Just fishy."

Oliver Wade seemed to ponder the description, then he asked, "Now you said that Mr. Walters entered your place of business on the night of the seventeenth of August and was standing at the bar, that first time, about eleven o'clock?"

"That's right."

"And was he taking something to drink?"

"Yes."

"Whisky?"

"It was rye."

"So it was rye. And you spoke to him and he gave you what you call a fishy look?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you were previously acquainted with Mr. Walters, I believe you said?"

"Yes, he'd been in my place before."

"And had he ever favored you with a fishy look before?"

Ruby Dwyer pursed her lips. "I don't remember he did."

"Well, had your relations been cordial?"

"Oh, sure, except for that time there was a scrap."

There was laughter in the courtroom and Judge Hatcher used the redwood gavel. Oliver waited for silence, then asked sharply, "Didn't it occur to you that what you describe as a fishy look might have been the vacuous expression of a drunken man?"

Ruby considered, glanced at Cobb, and said, "He'd been drinking, all right."

"Would you say he was drunk?"

"Well, maybe he was."

"That's all," said Oliver. He sat down beside Cobb, smiling, with an air of having made a strong point. Cobb closed his eyes and shook his head slightly.

Now Alben Bell moved forward. "Miss Dwyer, you said on cross-examination that your relations with Cobb Walters had been cordial *except* for the time there was a scrap. Do you mean to say you had an altercation with Cobb Walters?"

"Oh, no. He was in my place one night, just a few days before the shooting, and he took a poke at a guy and then there was a free-for-all. A couple of drillers was spoiling to take a crack at Cobb Walters, I guess because he was drunk and making a lot of noise."

"So he had been drinking that time, as well?"

"He sure had."

"And had he ever been in your place before that?"

"Yes. Once before that I remember."

"And what was his condition that time?"

"Same as usual. He was boiled."

Judge Hatcher waited an instant before he used his gavel, and then he warned in a tone that carried no real threat that if there was another demonstration he would order the courtroom cleared. Then Oliver was on his feet with a motion that the answer be stricken from the record and as he looked at Oliver's face Cobb thought that it was not so good. Insanity by reason of intoxication was not so good, but that was all the defense he had. And he *was* insane. God knows he was crazy in the head. He was crazy drunk.

The red-starred brown boots moved quickly down from the stand and the next witness was the thin, hard-faced man whom Cobb had often seen at the door of Halliday's gambling hall, the face at the peephole. He gave his name as Francis Xavier O'Leary, and said that he had been the partner of Jesse Halliday, of the deceased. He recalled the night of August seventeenth and said he had recognized Cobb Walters because Walters had often come there to play roulette. Just a couple of nights before he had lost fifteen hundred dollars. And on the night of the seventeenth of August Walters had entered the gambling hall and there was the bulge of a gun on his hip, although he had not seen the gun. No, he had not actually seen a gun. But Walters had asked for Jesse and had said that he would come back and to tell Jesse that he would be back. So he told Jesse, O'Leary testified, and Jesse had said, "When he comes back, don't let him in. I don't like the look of it," he had said. "Don't let him in."

Then there were the two guards, who testified that they had been told that night by Mr. Halliday to keep Cobb Walters out if he returned. "And watch out for him," Mr. Halliday had said. "He's got a gun. . . ."

The last witness that afternoon was Sue, and she had

a last name after all and it was Jenks. Sue Jenks. She wore a rather plain black dress with a white collar and it was a sure thing, Cobb thought, that it had not been in her wardrobe until the trial began. Yes, she knew Cobb Walters. She remembered him because one night there had been a fight and he had been knocked out and they had carried him up to her room. But he had made it all right with a twenty-dollar bill, so when he came into Ruby's White Way on the night of the seventeenth of August she went up to speak to him and asked him if he was going to be nice and he was nasty. And then she was sitting at a table with Ruby Dwyer and Jesse Halliday, she said, and it was just before midnight and Cobb Walters came in and pulled a gun and she ducked under the table. She saw the gun in his hand and she heard the shots, but she was under the table and she didn't see him shoot. And Jesse Halliday had a gun, too. She saw it in his hand after he was dead. Did she notice whether Cobb Walters drew first or Jesse Halliday drew first? She said she didn't know, but that Halliday hadn't quite got his gun out of his pocket. . . .

And then Cobb was taken back to the jail and he was glad of that and glad of the peace of his cell, where he could sit and look at the bare walls with initials cut deep in them and eat the supper that Nellie Barton had prepared. It was chicken that she had fried for him, and turnip greens and rice and cream gravy and hot biscuits and sorghum molasses. And he could eat it. And after eating he could smoke a cigarette, and these small things were important to him then. The taste of a cigarette after he had eaten, in the comforting enclosure of the cell, with the sun just set and the cathedral light there had been that afternoon in his hotel room when Jan had come to him, that late afternoon of the seventeenth of August. When it was over he would remember the taste of this cigarette, as he remembered now the fresh smell of the earth after

rain, the smell that came to the back of the nose and clung there moistly, or the smell of cut hay or the autumn smell when the persimmons were ripe and the hills were rich colors and the ground was a dark but luminous yellow. When it was over he would return to Fossil Creek and it would be time to harvest the pecans and knock them out of the trees with long poles and rip off the husks that left a brown stain on the fingers and put the nuts in cotton sacks. He knew that the memory was sweeter than the fact would ever be. But it was good to think about.

He had a visitor that night. It was against the regulations, but Sam McKim came to his cell and told him there was a lady waiting and took him to the visitors' room and it was Nancy Jo Paige. Cobb put his arms around her and kissed her and he shut his eyes tightly because there was moisture in them.

"I missed you today," he said. "I looked for you and I didn't see you."

"They wouldn't let me in.—Cobb, how is it going?"

"Not so good."

"That's because it's the prosecution. Oliver said it's always that way when you just hear the prosecution, when you just hear the one side of it."

"The trouble is there ain't another side," Cobb said. "Nancy Jo, I got no defense."

"Cobb, of course you have. Don't let it get you down. It will be all right."

"Maybe," Cobb said. "If it is, if I get off, you know what I'm going to do?"

She waited, watching his face.

"I'm going to get me a farm," Cobb said. "Just a small place down by the river. A quarter section or so. I don't want too much work to it, because I want to sit and watch my crops grow and get the pleasure out of farming that you can't get if you have to work too hard and if you have to worry. It won't be cotton and it won't be peanuts.

I don't know what it will be. Maybe orchards. Maybe peach orchards. They grow fine in this county. And maybe even a small ranch and watch the cattle get fat. And a nice house. Not a big place. Just a farmhouse with big beams and clapboards and a piazza as big as the house, or a patio. And big stone fireplaces and stone chimneys. I've got plenty of money left. I've got money in the bank and I've got that house on Sycamore Street. I'm going to sell that."

"Yes," Nancy Jo said.

"Honey, this is just talk. We both know that. I wish you'd heard that testimony today."

"I couldn't. I'm going to be a witness."

"No," Cobb said. "Damn it, I told Oliver no."

"But I can help. Oh, Cobb, I want to help."

"And let Alben Bell get at you? No, sir." He hesitated. "And what good would it do?"

"I know the condition you were in. You see? I can tell how drunk you were." Her eyes were shining strangely.

"Don't you worry."

Sam McKim rapped lightly on the door. Nancy Jo caught Cobb's hand. "I've got to go. But listen, when I'm on the witness stand keep looking at me, will you? Let me see you looking at me, will you? Because I'll be scared, and I'll need you."

"You won't be on the witness stand," Cobb said. "I'll tell Oliver."

Sam McKim opened the door. "Sorry, Mr. Walters. Sorry, Miss."

"Remember," Nancy Jo whispered. "Keep looking at me. Please don't forget, because I'll need you, darling."

She slipped out the door and Cobb returned to his cell. He stood at the window and watched the stars come out and watched the moon rise and it was the harvest moon, round and orange and as unreal as all things had been for so long.

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37

COBB was awake when the dawn came, and he lit a cigarette and was glad the night was over. The jail was still and he heard the chirping of insects in the tin-lined room down the corridor where the showers were. The jail cell was chill that morning and he thought that probably there would be an early frost this year, and if there was, and because there had been so much rain, the trees would change to colors as bright as he had ever seen.

In the fall the rolling hills seemed even more caressingly molded, when the sage was brown-stemmed and tipped with lavender, when the grass and weeds were yellow. Or there would be a line of trees like an Indian's roach on a hilltop where the berries of the yaupon would be bright red like an Indian's warpaint. There would be a view from a hilltop under a low gray sky and in the valley the dark bright foliage of the trees and the absolute black of a plowed field, and beyond that the luminous yellow of the hills with the dark color streaks of the sage. There would be a smell of wood smoke in the morning and a film of ice on the creek. There would be a lifting of the day, as this day lifted, and the pecans would be fallen to the ground with their husks splitting open, and the persimmons would be ripe and red, and in the tops of the trees the mistletoe would show in dark green clumps, while in the pastures the cattle would gather at the feedbins to wait for the wagon that crept along the horizon behind the bobbing heads of the horses.

After the first frost these Texas hills changed their char-

acter. In the summer they seemed rugged and bare and the hot sun glared on the stony crests, but after the first frost there was a softness and a subtlety of color, and the autumn was a long season of peaceful days and it was the best season of the year. In the autumn you hunted plover and quail and deer, or you treed a possum along the creek. And in the autumn you hunted skunks and your dog found their dens and you put in your hands and caught their tails and pulled them slowly out of the hole until you could see the place behind the head where you could put the muzzle of the gun and pull the trigger. When he was a boy Cobb had hunted skunks that way and sold their pelts and never once had he buried his clothes because of it.

The first noises of the morning came to Cobb, and then the smell of coffee from the kitchen. He got up and brushed his teeth and shaved and dressed. Sam McKim passed in the corridor and glanced in and gave him a friendly wink, but did not speak, and Cobb was grateful for that wink and for this morning.

He had breakfast and a cigarette and an extra cup of coffee that Nellie Barton had brought him, and a half hour before it was time for court to convene Sam McKim came to his cell and there was a deputy waiting to take him in the sheriff's car to the courthouse. They had never handcuffed him, and he walked across the park to the east steps where there were men to stare at him and no one to speak a word.

He waited in the sheriff's office until it was time, and then again he was taken through the crowded courtroom to the defense table, where his father sat with Oliver Wade.

"You have a good night, son?"

"Fine. I slept fine. Looks like we'll have a frost pretty soon."

"It's in the air. We'll make a big crop of pecans out on Fossil Creek. Wouldn't be surprised if we averaged

three hundred pounds to a tree. And lying fallow a year won't hurt that land none."

Oliver Wade patted Cobb's shoulder and sat beside him with his pad of yellow paper at hand.

Today it was the question of motive, and they must go back now to a hotel room in Tulsa over a year ago and the jury must hear how there was a poker game and how Cobb Walters won two thousand and fifty dollars, including oil and gas leases on two thousand acres of land in the County of Lebanon. Then they must show that the defendant had formed the Cobb Walters Oil Company and had drilled a well and discovered an oil field, and that Halliday had brought suit alleging that the leases had been obtained from him by fraud and under duress in a poker game in the Hotel Territory in Tulsa, Oklahoma. They came to the fifteenth of August, 1931, two days before the shooting in Ruby's White Way, and it was brought out that on that day the district court had handed down a decision in favor of the Cobb Walters Oil Company. And the court nodded slightly, remembering the decision and the hundred and eight pounds of fish he had caught in Mexican waters, and bowed to Ardmore Devant as the banker approached the witness stand.

Ardmore did not look at Cobb, and Cobb thought that he was more uncomfortable on the witness stand than Cobb was in the defendant's chair. Ardmore sat with his head drawn back, so that the wrinkles of his neck were pronounced, and his dark eyes were lidded so that he looked more than ever like a turtle.

There was the matter of a loan, in the fall of last year. One hundred thousand dollars to the Cobb Walters Oil Company; one hundred thousand dollars to the defendant, Cobb Walters, repayable in quarterly installments. Ardmore explained that the Cobb Walters Oil Company, through Glenn Settle as receiver for the corporation, had met its obligations. And had Cobb Walters, the defendant,

met his obligations under the terms of the loan? He had paid the February and May installments. They came now to the fifteenth of August, last. On the fifteenth of August the Lebanon National Bank had received no word from Mr. Walters.

"Mr. Devant, what was the collateral for the loan of one hundred thousand dollars to the defendant?"

"It was stock in the Cobb Walters Oil Company. Two hundred and seventy shares."

"Did you consider that stock to be ample security for a loan of one hundred thousand dollars?"

"We did when we granted the loan, but later we were much concerned about the collateral. After suit was filed against the company by Mr. Halliday we were very much concerned. If the suit had been decided against the company the collateral would have been worthless."

"And on the fifteenth of August, during the hours the Lebanon National Bank was open for business, in what light did you consider the collateral?"

"For all practical purposes, it was worthless. Since it was still tied up in litigation we could not have found a buyer for it that day when the loan was defaulted."

The bank had dispatched a formal letter to Cobb Walters, Ardmore testified, in which he was notified that the loan was in default, and the letter was mailed at 3 P.M., two hours before the decision in the suit was handed down.

Then it was the morning of Monday, August seventeenth, the morning of the day of Jesse Halliday's death. Cobb Walters had gone to the bank that morning and Ardmore had told him that under the terms of the loan the entire amount was due and payable because of the default. And Ardmore testified, with the air of a lenient man, that he had given Cobb until the close of the business day, until 3 P.M., to make good. But Cobb had failed to do so and the bank had taken possession of the collateral and Ardmore had refused a request for a few days' extension.

"We considered that we had already been overly patient," Ardmore said, not looking toward Cobb. "I told Mr. Walters that, and I informed him that we had taken over his collateral."

"And what did Mr. Walters say to that?"

There was a pause, and for the first time Ardmore glanced briefly at Cobb. "Mr. Walters asked me if the suit Jesse Halliday had brought against him had not been brought for the sole purpose of taking his control of the company away from him. He charged that it had been a conspiracy to break him."

"And what was your reply?"

"I said no. I told him not to let his imagination run away with him."

In cross-examination all Oliver Wade asked was whether or not it was a fact that Ardmore's daughter had been engaged to be married to Mr. Walters. And Ardmore said it was a fact. And was she now engaged to be married to Mr. Walters? And Ardmore said no. And had he approved of the engagement? And Ardmore said that he had given his consent.

There was one more witness for the prosecution. Cobb remembered the sleepy eyes that showed so much pasty eyelids. He was the Greek counterman from the Burkburnett Café in Ragtown, and he testified that Cobb had entered the lunchroom at half-past eleven on the night of the seventeenth of August. He remembered him because he had drunk two cups of coffee and a half glass of Worcestershire sauce.

Alben Bell asked what was the condition of the defendant, in his opinion, and the counterman grinned, and said, "He had plenty to drink but he looked sober after he downed that Worcestershire. I thought he was going to up-chuck."

Oliver Wade did not cross-examine, and the counterman was excused. Alben Bell glanced at Cobb, then turned

to Judge Hatcher and said, "We rest our case, your Honor."

Recess was taken and Cobb had his luncheon in the sheriff's office, where Oliver Wade came to talk to him. There were puckers around Oliver's eyes and his face seemed grayer than ever.

"Cobb," he said. "I'm not going to put you on the stand."

Cobb lit a cigarette.

"I'm going to call witnesses to show that you were insane by reason of intoxication," Oliver said. "But Jupiter, Cobb, I can't put you on the stand to say how drunk you were. See?"

"Yes."

"And I don't think the cross-examination would be so good. It wouldn't be so good."

"But look here, Oliver, I *was* insane. I never meant to shoot him. I swear I didn't."

"Naturally not," the lawyer said. "I believe you, boy. If I didn't I wouldn't be trying this case."

"I swear he reached for his gun first," Cobb said nervously. "I swear he did. Hell, how was I to know it wasn't loaded?"

"I wonder why it wasn't loaded," Oliver said. "I'd sure like to know that."

The food Cobb had eaten was heavy in his stomach and the cigarette burned his tongue. "Oliver, when you put those witnesses on, I don't want you to call Nancy Jo Paige."

Oliver put his hand on Cobb's shoulder. "Her testimony is important, Cobb. We've got to use her."

"I don't want you to do it."

Oliver Wade only smiled, and Joe Williams, the sheriff, opened the door then and said there was a lady waiting to see Oliver. Cobb saw Nancy Jo in the corridor and got

to his feet, but Sheriff Williams shut the door and shook his head. Cobb sat down again.

Five minutes later he was taken back to the courtroom and Judge Hatcher came to the bench. Alben Bell stood up, and looked around, then went to speak to the judge, who glanced up and called to the bailiff, "Please find Mr. Wade." Cobb had not noticed that Oliver was not present in the courtroom.

The bailiff apparently found Oliver in the corridor. He entered the courtroom with a quick step and murmured an apology to Judge Hatcher. As he sat down beside Cobb his gray face seemed curiously alive and his small eyes were bright.

"Cobb," he whispered. "We're going to get you out of this. You just sit tight."

The bailiff had walked to the door at the back, behind the judge's bench, and they all heard him call, "Miss Paige. Miss Nancy Jo Paige, come to the witness stand, please."

Cobb caught Oliver's eye and shook his head, but it was too late. He saw Nancy Jo coming through the door. Her face was pale, but she was smiling. It was little more than a frightened twist of her lips, but it was a smile. Cobb closed his eyes and thought, I done enough. I done enough to Clara and Jan and Nancy Jo and to old Ralph Paige. Yes, Christ, to old Ralph Paige. I done enough without this.

But he remembered what Nancy Jo had told him and he raised his head and met her eyes and smiled, and he kept looking at her steadily, as he had promised to do.

She was sworn and gave her name and said, yes, she knew the defendant, and pointed Cobb out. Her eyes seemed to follow her finger to him, and when she dropped her hand she kept looking at him.

"Miss Paige, did you see the defendant on the night of the seventeenth of August?" Oliver Wade asked.

"Yes, I did."

"Where was it that you saw him?"

"In a gambling hall operated by Jesse Halliday in the town of Devant."

A collective sighing noise stirred the courtroom and Judge Hatcher sat up a little straighter; Alben Bell got to his feet. Cobb kept looking into Nancy Jo's eyes.

"Will you tell us in your own words about that encounter, please?" Oliver asked.

"I went over to Halliday's about ten o'clock, because I thought I'd find him there. . . ."

"Just a minute, please. You went to Halliday's in search of Mr. Walters, did you say?"

"Yes. I knew that he often went there and I had accompanied him there before."

Oliver smiled, and set his feet wide apart, and said, "Continue, please."

"You mean about August seventeenth?—Well, I went there about ten o'clock, but Mr. Walters wasn't there and I played roulette." She looked across at Cobb, and focused out the rest of the courtroom. "Mr. Walters came in a little before eleven o'clock and he had been drinking. He staggered and his speech was thick. I tried to persuade him to come away with me and take some black coffee, but he said he'd go alone and would return for me. As soon as he had gone Jesse Halliday came out of his private office and spoke to me and then the man at the door—I think his name is O'Leary—came up and told Jesse that Cobb Walters had been there and that he had a gun on his hip and had asked to see Jesse. Then Jesse said he didn't want Cobb Walters in his place and to throw him out, but Mr. O'Leary said, 'I tell you, he's got a gun, Jesse,' and Jesse said, 'Is that so?' and he looked at me and smiled and said, 'Okay, maybe you'd better let him in. . . .'"

Nancy Jo hesitated, and it was very quiet in the courtroom. Cobb was thinking that it would do no good and that Oliver should never have called her to the stand, think-

ing, there's no use putting her through hell like this and bringing all that out. It won't do no good. . . .

"Jesse walked back to his office and I followed him," Nancy Jo was saying. "He saw me in the doorway and asked me in for a drink. I accepted and after he mixed the drinks he went over to his desk and opened a drawer and took out a revolver and a box of cartridges and loaded the gun. He looked at me then and said he'd told Walters to stay out of his place and that if Walters put his foot in the door that night he'd blow his head off."

Nancy Jo drew in a deep breath. "And then he finished his drink and kept grinning at me and he said, 'I ain't a blood-thirsty man and I ain't a gunman, but that—that—but he cheated me out of my leases and he's got it coming to him.'"

Nancy Jo stopped talking and expelled a slow, quivering breath. Alben Bell put his feet wide apart and stared at her face, and Cobb listened intently, with a puzzled frown. Oliver said quietly, "Continue, please, Miss Paige."

"Well—then he said that Cobb Walters had a gun and it would be self-defense but that he was going to get him and it was going to be permanent."

She had to pause again, and her eyes found Cobb's. She tried to smile. Her face was white and her hands were clenched in her lap. When she spoke again her voice was low and steady. "Just then his partner—I think it's Mr. O'Leary—came back and said there was a man who wanted to cash a check and would Jesse okay it, and Jesse said he'd take a look and they went out together and left me alone in the office. Jesse had put the gun on his desk." She spoke quickly now. "So I just had a minute and I picked up the gun and took the cartridges out of it and put them in the box with the others in that drawer and I closed the drawer and I left the unloaded gun on the desk where he had put it. . . ."

God, Cobb thought, she's lying. She's lying for me. But

still that gun *was* unloaded and that was a funny thing and maybe that's the way it happened. Maybe she's telling the truth. And she's the only witness on that night, she's the only one who's respectable. The rest are whores and pimps and gamblers. . . .

"He came back in a minute and put the gun in his pocket," Nancy Jo said. Her voice sounded loud in the still courtroom. Cobb had never known such a stillness. "And then Mr. O'Leary returned and told Jesse that the guards had caught Mr. Walters at the door and run him out of town. And Jesse laughed and put on his hat and went out of the building and that's the last I ever saw of him because I came back to Lebanon then."

It was convincing. Cobb could tell from the faces of the jurors that it was convincing. He could tell by Alben Bell's angry frown and by the sudden air of interest that Judge Hatcher had acquired. It was convincing but, Cobb thought, it's a damned lie. It's a beautiful damned lie. But Jesus, how sweet!

"Miss Paige," said Oliver Wade, "please tell the jury why you took the cartridges out of Jesse Halliday's gun."

"Well, he said he was going to shoot Mr. Walters."

"And Mr. Walters is a friend of yours?"

"Oh—yes."

"Since school days?"

"Yes."

"That is all, Miss Paige."

Alben Bell began his cross-examination, and Nancy Jo sat very still, except for the movement of her hands in her lap.

"Well, Miss Paige," the district attorney began in a casual tone. "You must have known Jesse Halliday pretty well."

"Yes." It was only a whisper.

"A little louder, please. The jury wants to hear you." Alben Bell's smile was considerate.

"I said yes."

"You knew him well enough to walk into his office uninvited, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well enough to share a drink of whisky with him in his office?"

"Yes."

"And well enough to be left alone in his office while he went out to attend to some business?"

"Yes."

"*And*, well enough to be the confidante of the somewhat extraordinary statement that he planned to kill a man?"

"That's what he said to me."

"So you testified. Doesn't it seem to you, Miss Paige, that if he made such a statement to you he must have thought that you were rather more *his* friend than you were Mr. Walters' friend?"

"I don't know what he thought," Nancy Jo said, and she kept her chin steady with an effort.

"But perhaps he did not know that you were a friend of Mr. Walters, Miss Paige. Could that be it?"

"No. I had been there before with Mr. Walters."

"And on this occasion, on the night of the seventeenth of August, who accompanied you to Devant, Miss Paige?"

Nancy Jo gave her head a slight shake. "No one."

"No one?" Alben Bell raised his eyebrows. "You mean you went there alone?"

"Yes, I was alone."

Alben Bell pursed his lips. "But Devant has the reputation of being rather a rough town, hasn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"In fact, a typical boom town?"

"I don't know whether it's typical. It's the only one I've ever seen."

"But you did not hesitate to go there alone on the night of August seventeenth?"

"No, I went."

"And you knew it was a rough town?"

"Yes."

"And you knew a gambling hall was your destination?"

"Yes, of course."

"But you had no misgivings?"

"None."

"Because you had been there often before you felt safe there, is that it?"

"Yes."

"And was it because of Jesse Halliday that you felt safe there?"

Nancy Jo hesitated, then said, "Because I knew him. Yes."

"And also because you and Mr. Halliday were very good friends indeed, isn't that it?"

"Our relations were cordial," Nancy Jo said.

"No more than cordial?"

"No more."

Alben Bell smiled and glanced at the jury as he walked back to the counsel table. He picked up a pad on which his assistant had made a number of notes, and step by step he went over Nancy Jo's testimony. Had she noticed a gun on Cobb Walters' hip? She was not sure. Had she taken drinks in Halliday's office before? Yes, a number of times, but never alone with him, because she had never gone there alone before.

"And why did you go to Devant alone on the night of the seventeenth of August, Miss Paige?"

"To find Mr. Walters."

"To find Mr. Walters, you say? Now why did you wish to find Mr. Walters? Was it because he had threatened to murder Jesse Halliday?"

"No."

"Was it because you *feared* that he was desperate and that he would shoot Jesse Halliday?"

"No."

"Suppose you tell us, Miss Paige, *why* you went to Devant alone that night?"

"Because I had just heard that Mr. Walters had lost control of his company." Color came into Nancy Jo's cheeks. "I thought that I could, well, comfort him."

Alben Bell knew better than to browbeat a pretty girl on the witness stand. He kept smiling all the time, and his weapons were sarcasm and a monotonous repetition of allied questions that took Nancy Jo again and again over the testimony she had given.

"Miss Paige, you were a good friend of Cobb Walters, were you not?"

"I am," Nancy Jo said.

"And you were a good friend of Jesse Halliday as well?"

"We were cordial."

"Yes, of course. Cordial enough to share a drink in his office, sufficiently cordial for you to have free access to his office, uninvited. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"And you took advantage of that right of free access to remove the cartridges from his gun, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Now, when you took those bullets from his gun, Miss Paige, what exactly was in your mind?"

"I wanted to prevent his shooting Mr. Walters."

"As a matter of fact, Miss Paige, when you took those bullets from Halliday's gun, weren't you making a choice?"

Nancy Jo shook her head slightly. "I don't understand."

"I will rephrase the question. Isn't it a fact that you knew Cobb Walters was in Devant with a gun on his hip and murder in his heart, and that you saw Jesse Halliday load his gun, and you made a choice between those two men, and there and then in Halliday's office, to which you

had the right of free access and where you had just shared a drink of whisky with Jesse Halliday, there and then you made a choice between Cobb Walters and Jesse Halliday and you took the bullets out of Halliday's gun and sent him to his death?"

"No," Nancy Jo said. "No, I . . . No!"

"That's all," said Alben Bell, and Cobb thought, thank God he decided to be so damned subtle and to leave it like that with a dirty insinuation. . . .

Nancy Jo followed the bailiff to the door at the back of the courtroom and Oliver Wade got to his feet. His hand rested lightly on Cobb's shoulder as he said, "The defense rests, your Honor."

Judge Hatcher ordered a ten-minute recess, and after the jury had filed out Cobb was taken to the sheriff's office. He looked for Nancy Jo in the corridor, but he did not see her, and he did not see Ralph Paige. Ed Drum was standing near the door of the courtroom, his face a sallow oval in the dim light, his spectacles shining like great tears. He looked at Cobb, turned, and walked away.

Oliver Wade followed Cobb into the sheriff's office, where Cobb faced the lawyer and said, "Oliver, why didn't you tell me about it?"

"Boy, I didn't know. She came to me at the noon recess and told me what her story was and I put her on the stand."

"I think she was lying," Cobb said.

Oliver grinned. "Jupiter, that's no way to treat a gift horse, and, Cobb, that's the horse that's going to take you out of this thing, at a gallop."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it. Cobb, you wait and hear me lay into Alben's witnesses. They're all shady characters, and Nancy Jo is the daughter of the head of the Chamber of Commerce."

"That's what I've been thinking," Cobb said. "It's a hell

of a thing. Oliver, I've been thinking that I'd rather have taken my chances as it was."

The sheriff signaled to them and they returned to the courtroom. Cobb sat at the defense table with his father and listened to Oliver's summation. Oliver made it brief, and he spoke quietly, without once lifting his voice. There had been a shooting in a dance hall in Devant, said Oliver. Yes, it was conceded that there had been a shooting and Jesse Halliday had been killed and Cobb Walters had shot him. Cobb Walters shot him and the world lost another common gambler, another criminal.

"Now, we have the testimony of a number of witnesses that Cobb Walters was very drunk," Oliver said, "Miss Ruby Dwyer, in whose dance hall Jesse Halliday was shot, said that he was drunk. Miss Sue Jenks, an employee there, said that he had been drinking. The counterman in the quick lunch around the corner said that he was drunk. True, Miss Dwyer and Miss Jenks are not the best sort of witnesses that could be produced, but who has had better experience than women of their type to know when a man is drunk? And who has better experience than a counterman in an all-night lunch? Yes, you might say that we have had the testimony of qualified experts on the subject of inebriation, and they agree that Cobb Walters was drunk, and he *was* drunk.

"But, gentlemen, we do not argue that Mr. Walters was so drunk that he did not know what he was doing. That he was too drunk to know the nature and quality of his acts, yes, but, gentlemen, he had sufficient control of his faculties to recognize a danger and a threat and to draw his gun and defend himself. And it was in self-defense that he acted when he shot Jesse Halliday on the night of the seventeenth of August in Ruby's White Way in the unincorporated town of Devant.

"Now the prosecution will argue that there was an incredible conspiracy to rob Mr. Walters of his oil com-

pany. The prosecution will ask you to believe that Mr. Ardmore Devant, president of the Lebanon National Bank, conspired with Jesse Halliday, a gambler and a consort of prostitutes, to steal Mr. Walters' oil company away from him, and that because of this ridiculous conspiracy Mr. Walters armed himself and sought out Jesse Halliday and shot Jesse Halliday. Now, gentlemen, it was all very interesting, this theory the prosecution advanced as a motive in this case, interesting even though altogether outside the realm of reason. You realize, of course, that the prosecution has to demonstrate a motive in order to prove murder in the first degree and they showed you the best excuse for a motive that they could piece together.

"But, gentlemen, all that goes by the board when we consider the testimony of the one reputable witness in this entire case. I refer, of course, to Miss Nancy Jo Paige. Born in this county, brought up in this town, the daughter of Mr. Ralph Paige, whom you know as the president of the Chamber of Commerce. I believe, gentlemen, that you will take her word against the testimony of the madam of a brothel, or a prostitute in her employ, or the strong-arm squad of a gambling hall in the roughest town this side of hell.

"And what did Miss Nancy Jo Paige tell you? Simply that on the night of the seventeenth of August she had learned that Cobb Walters had lost control of his oil company, which he had founded, and was practically a bankrupt. Cobb Walters, her former schoolmate, her dear friend. The man who persevered and bored for oil here in Lebanon and found it and made this county rich and turned a time of great depression into a time of rejoicing. The man to whom we all owe gratitude, and the man for whom Miss Paige held an affection possibly stronger than gratitude. She wanted to help him, and she believed that he had gone to Jesse Halliday's gambling hell in Devant, and she went in search of him. And she found him and

he was very drunk. She told you gentlemen that he was very drunk. So she asked him to drink some black coffee and he said he would and he said that he would return for her and she waited for him, and while she was waiting she saw this man Halliday putting bullets in a gun and he invited her to partake of refreshment and she accepted. And why should she not? Halliday was her host. It was not the first time he had invited patrons to join him in refreshments in his office. It was his duty as a host because he wanted these people to return and he wanted to win their money on his crooked roulette tables.

"So Miss Nancy Jo Paige walked into the spider's den and she accepted refreshment and then this monstrous man informed her that he planned to shoot and kill her dear friend, her schoolmate, a man who was then so far gone in his cups that he was unable to defend himself. She has told you how Halliday was called out of his office to cash the check of another victim and how she had one minute—sixty precious seconds—in which to snatch up the gun and take the bullets out of it and put them in the box and put the box in the drawer and put the unloaded gun back on the desk where Halliday had left it.

"And then she knew that her friend was safe and that if Halliday drew his gun to shoot him down there would only be a harmless clicking of the hammer. So she returned to Lebanon, not knowing that when Cobb Walters had been refused admittance to Halliday's gambling hell, he was concerned about her welfare, and was searching for her. Not knowing that he was searching for her to offer her his protection and that he went into Ruby Dwyer's place, where Jesse Halliday was drinking with the madam and one of the unfortunate women who helped supply her livelihood.

"Cobb Walters walked into the dance hall, staggering a little, and Jesse Halliday saw him and reached for his gun. But drunk as he was Cobb Walters saw the danger and sought to defend himself, and while Jesse Halliday

snapped the trigger on the empty chambers of his gun Cobb Walters fired four times.

"Gentlemen, Cobb Walters had no wish to shoot anyone. He went into that den of criminals where they were waiting to kill him and he saw the danger and he removed Jesse Halliday from the world of thieves and panders. Gentlemen, I ask you for an acquittal for my client on the grounds of self-defense. I ask you for an acquittal for Cobb Walters and I ask you for a vote of thanks for what he did . . ."

Oliver Wade sat down, sweating, and Alben Bell rose and bowed to Oliver and smiled at the jury and began his summation in a low, confidential tone. Nancy Jo Paige was a young girl, he said, and in this last year since oil was struck in Lebanon County it had been hard for a mature man to keep his values straight, much less a girl of tender age. Oil certainly made a difference. It brought sudden wealth and rough men and women to a county that had been at peace with nature through the years. Was it any wonder that it turned a young girl's head, and who are we to blame her when all of us have known the meaning of temptation? I would be the last to throw a stone at Nancy Jo Paige, said Alben Bell.

"But, gentlemen, the facts must be faced. Oil was discovered in Lebanon County and oil brought brothels, saloons and gambling hells to this county. Oil brought depravity and murder to Lebanon. And oil turned the head of Nancy Jo Paige.

"There was Cobb Walters, the man who discovered this great oil field, the president of a rich oil company, an influential figure. And there was Jesse Halliday pitted against him. The man who had originally prospected for oil and who had lost his leases to Cobb Walters in a poker game. The courts have ruled that it was an honest game. There were no marked cards. There was no shaved deck. Gentlemen, it was an honest game, according to the decision of the court. But Jesse Halliday brought suit, and the suit

tied up the Cobb Walters Oil Company in receivership and Cobb Walters was over-extended and lost control of his company.

"Now, gentlemen, you heard the testimony of Mr. Ardmore Devant, the leading banker of this county, a man of irreproachable character. You heard Mr. Ardmore Devant testify that Cobb Walters had openly charged that the suit was brought against him as part of a conspiracy to deprive him of control of his company. Whether or not there was a conspiracy is not your concern. The fact is that Cobb Walters *believed* there was a conspiracy and that Jesse Halliday had filed suit as a part of that conspiracy, and so he hated Jesse Halliday and so he murdered Jesse Halliday.

"He didn't shoot Mr. Ardmore Devant. Oh, no. Mr. Ardmore Devant is the leading banker of this county and you know very well that a man can't go out and casually shoot down a citizen of Mr. Ardmore Devant's stature and importance. But Jesse Halliday? Ah, yes. A common gambler. The operator of a gambling hell in an oil boom town where there are shootings at the rate of one a week. On men of Jesse Halliday's stripe it is always open season, or so Cobb Walters thought, because Cobb Walters is a reckless, braggartly, blackguardly, overbearing, and, at heart, a cowardly man.

"So when he lost control of his company Cobb Walters believed there had been a conspiracy against him and he put a gun in his pocket and he went out to do the cowardly thing. He went out to shoot the little man, the dubious man, the man who ran a gambling hell in an oil boom town. And he found him in a dance hall and shot him down and killed him. There's no dispute about that. It's conceded. The defense makes no attempt to disprove that Cobb Walters did go to a dance hall and did find Jesse Halliday there and did draw his gun and did kill him. It's a fact and they concede it.

"Cobb Walters went to Devant with murder in his heart.

He went gunning for Jesse Halliday. He went first to Jesse Halliday's gambling rooms and they told him Halliday was not there, so he went out again to a quick lunch and he drank some Worcestershire sauce to sober him and it *did* sober him. The counterman who served him told you that. Gentlemen, this man was cold sober and there was murder in his heart and he was gunning for Jesse Halliday. It was premeditated murder and it was the motive of a coward and we have shown you that motive. It was hate and revenge.

"So Cobb Walters went back again to the gambling rooms and the guards attempted to persuade him to leave town and they thought they had succeeded. But he sneaked around by a back way—we don't know his route because he did not take the stand to tell us, and of course, gentlemen, that is nothing against the defendant. There is no compulsion upon the defendant to take the stand in his own defense. It is a matter of choice of his attorney, and his attorney chose not to put him on the stand and to rest his defense on one single witness. On the testimony of Nancy Jo Paige.

"Now we know, gentlemen, that Nancy Jo Paige is a young girl, and her head has been turned by all that has happened since oil was discovered in this county. We don't blame her for it. We don't pass judgment. We only pass on the facts, and that *is* the fact. She was intimate with Cobb Walters. He was her friend. And she was intimate with Jesse Halliday. *He* was her friend. Two men utterly alien in temperament and character, you will say, and that perhaps was the fascination of it.

"But, gentlemen, when you are loved by two men who are poles apart, there must come a time when you must make a choice. There is bound to be a showdown. And the showdown came on the night of the seventeenth of August when Cobb Walters went to Devant to murder Jesse Halliday, and Nancy Jo Paige knew it and she was torn by emotion as she watched Halliday load his gun, and

then there was a heaven-sent opportunity when she was left alone in his office, and certainly she must have thought that it was the hand of fate.

"How her little hands must have trembled as she took the bullets from that gun, from Jesse Halliday's sole weapon of defense. She removed the bullets and left him helpless and then and there she made her choice and for that moment she was in a god-like role and she could choose which man should live and which man should die. And she drew the black bean for Jesse Halliday. As those glorious heroes of our Texas Independence were forced to draw beans and one bean in ten was black and the man who drew the black bean was to be the victim of Santa Anna's firing squad, so Nancy Jo Paige played her inglorious role and she chose the black bean for Jesse Halliday and spared the life of her other lover. . . .

"But, gentlemen, Nancy Jo Paige is not on trial here. Nancy Jo Paige, in her quandary and in the throes of an emotion that searched out her woman's heart, Nancy Jo Paige was only the instrument that brought to success the cold and brutal plan that Cobb Walters had laid to murder Jesse Halliday, the little man, the little gambler, for hate and revenge. The plan succeeded, gentlemen, and Jesse Halliday is dead and this surprise testimony of Nancy Jo Paige is only a sidelight, an illuminating sidelight on how fate plays her hand.

"Jesse Halliday is dead and the man who murdered him is here before you at the bar. You know that Cobb Walters killed Jesse Halliday and you know the motive and you know that it was cold, premeditated murder, and I ask that you bring in a verdict of guilty of murder in the first degree and that you assess the penalty of death. . . ."

Cobb looked at Oliver Wade and Oliver's face seemed grayer than before, and he looked at his father and Tom Walters lowered his eyes, and he looked behind him and saw Ralph Paige in the front row. Ralph sat with one hand shading his face.

THE sheriff's office, where Cobb waited for the verdict, was a dingy room with cracked plaster that had not been renewed since the dedication of the courthouse. Some of it was covered over with notices of men wanted by the police, but the cracks ran from ceiling to floor like a spider's web.

Cobb stood at the window, looking out through bars at the square, and he thought that Oliver Wade was a good lawyer, but he wasn't a trial lawyer. He had no place in a criminal case. He couldn't stand up against a prosecutor as clever as Alben Bell. And then he thought that it was over now and there was no turning back. The case was in and the jury was locked in the juryroom down the hall and there was nothing for him to do but wait.

The sheriff had pulled a typewriter desk over near the door and was playing knock rummy with a court attendant and a deputy. Cobb had watched the turn of the greasy cards for a while and he had remembered John and Rosie Redbird and had put his hand in his pocket and touched the medicine man once again. Then he had turned away to the window and he thought that you couldn't believe in medicine men and superstitions at a time like this. Not when your life was involved.

"I'll knock with twenty-one," the sheriff said.

Cobb heard the clink of dimes tossed across the table and closed his eyes. Then he turned and glanced at the clock. It was seven-thirty.

"Better sit down and rest yourself, Mr. Walters," the sheriff said. "It will be a long time yet."

"You think so?" Cobb could control his voice. "They've been out a couple of hours."

The sheriff laughed. "They'll wait and eat supper on the county."

"Oh—yes."

Cobb found a chair and sat down. He wiped sweat from his face and watched the turn of the greasy cards. After a time he cleared his throat and asked, "You hear Alben Bell's summation?"

"No, I didn't," the sheriff said, and the court attendant laughed and said, "He's hot stuff."

The sheriff shrugged. "Don't worry about it. The judge made a good charge. You look all right."

"You think so?"

"Sure."

The three men concentrated on the sticky cards, embarrassed, and Cobb returned to the window. I shouldn't of asked 'em that, he thought. I got to keep it to myself. But I wish I knew what that sheriff really thinks. He's seen plenty of this.

Cobb went slowly to the chair and sat down and crossed one leg over the other, and uncrossed it, and lit a cigarette. He saw the sheriff glance at the deputy and the man got up and left the room.

"Want to take a hand?" the sheriff asked.

Cobb dropped his cigarette on the floor and stepped on it. "Yes, if you don't mind. . . ."

"Sure. Sit in."

The sheriff dealt the cards and Cobb arranged his hand. The game went on, discarding, drawing from the pack, fitting the new card to his hand, if it fitted, discarding again. They played to the break and Cobb knocked with a deuce and won.

The deputy returned and shut the door and pulled up

another chair for himself. He looked at Cobb, then turned questioning eyes to the sheriff.

"Go ahead," the sheriff said. "Tell him."

"It's seven to five. Seven to five for acquittal."

The sheriff grinned at Cobb. "You see?"

Cobb's hands fumbled with the cards and two fell on the floor. He could not speak.

"We got a guard outside the juryroom and he can hear what's going on," the sheriff said. "You're all right."

"Sure," the deputy said. "Seven to five for acquittal means they'll acquit. They never shift around the other way."

Cobb dealt the cards. They were sticky and he misdealt and had to deal again.

"The little lady fixed you up," the sheriff said, watching Cobb's fingers. "If I had a witness like that I'd stand trial any time."

"Yes," Cobb said. He did not want to talk about it.

"You got nothing to worry about," the sheriff said.

That's three times he's said that, Cobb thought. I wish he wouldn't say it. I wish he wouldn't talk about it. But it's seven to five for acquittal. Seven to five.

Cobb knocked with thirty-three, and his face was flushed, his voice too high. He lost to the sheriff and when he paid the money fell out of his fingers as if they were numb.

Maybe it's eight to four now, he thought. Maybe they talked another over. Eight of 'em can easy talk four over. They can put two men on each of the four the way they do at Lord's Adopted meetings when they're talking God into 'em and they'll talk God into those guys in there. It must be eight to four by now.

There was a knock at the door and Cobb's heart jumped. The sheriff said, "Come in," and the bailiff opened the door. Cobb got slowly to his feet and let the cards fall from his hand.

"The jury's gone to supper," the bailiff said.

Cobb sat down again.

"Joe," the sheriff said to the deputy. "Run out and get some sandwiches and coffee. What kind of sandwich you want, Mr. Walters?"

"I don't care. I ain't hungry."

"Ham all right? Okay, Joe. Ham."

The deputy picked up his tan Stetson hat and went out, and the sheriff tossed in his hand. He grinned at Cobb. "I raided a still over toward Devant yesterday. The feller had it dug into the side of a branch and brush piled over it and the vent pipe coming out on top and covered over with turf." The sheriff paused, and his smile was friendly. "It ain't bad stuff. Not bad at all. He had it in charred kegs."

Cobb nodded.

"I brought in some samples, for evidence." The sheriff winked. "I got it marked for eyedentification. How about we introduce it in evidence?"

"Well, how about it?" Cobb said.

"Lock the door, Al," the sheriff said to the court attendant, and went to a corner. He removed a yellow slicker from the floor and picked up a gallon jug that had been concealed by the slicker. He gave the jug to Cobb.

Cobb slipped his thumb through the handle, and the body of the jug rested on his arm as he drank the warm, thick liquor. It burned down into his stomach, and when he passed the jug to the sheriff his hand was steady and he felt better, much better.

"Say," he said. "It wasn't Jack Vibart you raided?"

"Hell, no. But it's good, ain't it? Just as good as Jack makes." The sheriff up-ended the jug, drank, and wiped his mouth. "You know how it is, we got to knock these fellers over once in a while."

"Sure," Cobb said. He drank again and put the jug on the desk. When the deputy returned with the sandwiches

he could eat. He crumpled the waxed paper in which the sandwich had been wrapped and threw it toward a wastebasket. The sheriff passed him the jug once more and said, "Remember, when you go back in there you got to stand up. You got to stand up and face the jury."

"I can do that now better than I could," Cobb said.

"Here they come," said the deputy, from the window. "They're coming out of the Alamo Café now."

Cobb looked toward the window, but he did not get to his feet. His legs were weak and the wound in his thigh ached.

"It won't be long now," the sheriff said cheerfully. "Anybody want to play knock rummy?"

"Hell, yes, I'm two-bits out," the deputy said, and returned to the table. But Cobb did not play. He moved over to the window and looked out at the square. He looked out and thought that in a little while he would be down there and he would walk across the square a free man, or else . . .

He turned and spoke to the deputy. "You heard anything else?"

The man hesitated, inspecting his cards. He said over his shoulder, with a quick glance at Cobb, "When they went out to supper it was still seven to five."

"Oh," Cobb said. . . . Not eight to four yet. Still seven to five. But seven to five for acquittal and they never shift around the other way, the deputy had said. Cobb went to his chair and sat down to watch the rummy game.

It was ten minutes to nine when the bailiff knocked on the door and called, "Jury's coming in."

"Okay," the sheriff said. He handed Cobb the jug. "Better take a little snifter."

"Thanks." Cobb drank deeply and he did not even taste the whisky. He stumbled to the door and along the corridor between the court attendant and the bailiff. He looked

back once and saw the sheriff in the doorway of his office, watching him.

Now it had come, Cobb told himself. Thank God for the whisky. Thank God he could walk firmly and keep his head up.

There was a cluster of dusty lightbulbs in a wheel-shaped chandelier overhead, and there were long shadows in the courtroom. There were sandwich and chewing gum papers on the floor, a few cigarette butts. But the crowd was small now, and as Cobb walked forward he saw Ralph Paige in the front row. Beside him were Nora Joplin and Clara, and Oliver Wade stood inside the railing by the defense table. And Sandy Lake grinned at Cobb, and shifted his wad of tobacco, and glanced away.

The bailiff stopped Cobb outside the railing, and he saw for the first time that the twelve men were in the jurybox and that Judge Hatcher was on the bench and that there was an air of expectancy. They had been waiting for him to be brought in.

The bailiff stepped forward and left Cobb standing at the railing with the court attendant. Why don't they get on with it? Cobb thought, and he looked anxiously at Oliver Wade. Oliver gave him a pinched smile.

Then Cobb heard the bailiff's voice, loud and clear, "Will the jury please rise," and there was a creaking of chairs as the twelve men stood up. "Will the defendant face the jury." Feet gripping the floor, his chin raised, his hands clenched at his sides, Cobb looked at the foreman and saw nothing.

"Will the jury look upon the defendant." The bailiff's chest rose slightly, his head went back. "Has the jury agreed upon a verdict?"

"We have." The foreman looked directly at Cobb, and Cobb lowered his eyes. In the torture of this moment he was glad of the delaying routine.

"What say you, Mr. Foreman, do you find this defendant guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," the foreman said.

Cobb closed his eyes and a weight knocked against him and held him and it was Nora, kissing him. Oliver Wade shook his hand and Clara smiled, her eyes very green in the electric light, and put out her hand. Cobb took it and held it, and his palm was slick with perspiration. Remembering that night in his car, in the lane of sunflowers, he was ashamed to look into her eyes.

Jan was there, saying, "Cobb, I'm so glad."

Then he felt his father's hand on his shoulder, and the grip of his father's fingers on which the calluses would always be, and heard his father's voice, "Cobb, I'll tell Ada, and then you're coming home, ain't you?"

"Yes, I'm coming home." Cobb's voice was choked.

Sandy Lake pinched Cobb's shoulder and grinned. "Boy, your luck ain't run out yet. It sure ain't run out."

Cobb clutched Sandy's hand. "I guess I still got some friends left," he said. "Christ, who's got a cigarette? Can I smoke in here now? Nora, give me one of those cigars you smoke. I don't believe I could taste a cigarette."

He struck a match and he could not bring the flame to the end of the cigar for an instant and he laughed and they all laughed and Cobb said, "I'm still scared to death. But I'm free again. Oliver, thanks."

The foreman of the jury came over and Cobb shook his hand and murmured something and the foreman said, "We had to wait a decent interval after supper. There was never any doubt, Mr. Walters."

"Well, if I'd known *that*," Cobb said, and laughed, and shook the foreman's hand again.

Then Cobb thought of Ralph Paige, and looked around the courtroom, but Ralph had gone. Cobb walked away from the small group of people who were still his friends. He went quickly to the door and saw Ralph far away at

the end of the corridor. He started trotting, limping, and called out, "Ralph!"

Ralph Paige turned and when Cobb saw his pale, gentle face a stab of pain choked off his breathing. Ralph waited, and Cobb approached him slowly. Ralph looked down at the worn boards of the floor. "I had to hurry away, Cobb. She wanted me to phone her as soon as there was a verdict."

"Let me tell her," Cobb said. "Is she at home, Ralph?"

"Yes."

"Ralph," Cobb said. "Ralph, I . . ." He took the black cigar out of his mouth and threw it into a brass cuspidor. "I guess you hate my guts, Ralph, and I'm sorry for it. I haven't got any excuse to make except—damn it—I told Oliver not to put her on the stand."

"I don't hate you, Cobb," Ralph said wearily.

"I didn't want her to go on the stand and it was a surprise to me," Cobb said. "But, Ralph, I'm proud of her. She didn't have to do it. I'm sure proud of her and I'd like to shove some of those dirty things Alben Bell said down his damned throat."

"He was only trying a case," Ralph said.

"None of it was true," Cobb said earnestly. "Nancy Jo is the sweetest girl I ever saw and you got a right to be proud of her."

"I have never criticized my daughter," Ralph Paige said slowly. "I do not criticize her now."

His dignity stopped the words in Cobb's mouth. Cobb flushed and felt ashamed. He hesitated. Ralph Paige had not put out his hand and he did not now extend it. "Well, I'm going to tell Nancy Jo," Cobb said. "Is it all right if I tell her?"

"I think she'd like to hear it from you, Cobb?"

"All right," Cobb said. He looked again at Ralph's pale face, then started along the corridor. He passed the sher-

iff's office and the sheriff grinned and waved and said, "Just like I told you."

"Thanks," Cobb said, and he ran on to the door and across the street to the North Garage, where they had towed his car and kept it all the time he was in jail.

Joe Simmons looked at him and grinned. "Well, say! Nice going, Mr. Walters."

"Yes," Cobb said.

"Congratulations. I guess it's congratulations, ain't it?"

"You bet it is. Will you get me my car, Joe?"

Cobb stepped inside the garage to wait, inside the garage where he would not be seen. He looked out at the square and swallowed the warm summer air. His heart still raced and his knees were unsteady. The lights of the square shone through a film, and there was a taste in his mouth like the taste of blood in the throat of a man who has run to the limit of his endurance. But Cobb wanted to shout and laugh, and he put his hand on the handle of the door and squeezed the iron hard.

"I'm free, he thought. God damn, I'm free. I can walk across the square and nobody to stop me. I can get in my car and just start driving. God damn, I'm free! I can go down to the river for a swim and I could get a boat and fish tonight for catfish. I could saddle a horse and ride up the hill to the stars. And I can get me a bottle and hot damn, will I get drunk!"

Cobb slapped his palm on the wall and saw there a row of penciled telephone numbers on the wood, and then he saw the telephone. He snatched up the receiver and gave the number of the Paige house. He heard three distant rings, then Nancy Jo answered. Her voice was low and breathless.

"Hello, there," Cobb said.

"Cobb? Is it Cobb?"

"You bet."

"Then it's not guilty? Is it not guilty?"

"You're damned right, not guilty!" Cobb grinned at the telephone.

"Oh, darling, thank God."

"The jury just came in," Cobb said. "You know what that foreman said? He said there was never any doubt, after what you done. Honey, I'm free as air and I don't know what to say."

"Cobb, where are you?"

"I'm sure proud. You were wonderful up there and I wish I had your guts. I'm sure proud of you. I tried to find you in the corridor afterwards . . ."

"Darling, where *are* you?"

"I'm at the garage, waiting for my car. I'm on my way up to see you, honey."

"Then hurry."

"I'll hurry. I'm on my way."

Cobb hung up and leaned his forehead against the mouthpiece, thinking, Jesus, what she done! What she done when she got up there on the stand. What she done for me. She was damn wonderful and I wish I had her guts. But I ain't going to talk about that. I ain't going to ask her if it was true. I ain't going to ask her if she *did* take the bullets out of that gun. Somebody took 'em out, and that's a fact, but I ain't going to ask if it was her. . . . I'll just ride up there under the pecan trees and I'll tell her we're two of a kind, her and me, and we'll get the hell out of this town, her and me. That's what we'll do. We'll go away somewheres. We'll go out to East Texas. I got money in the bank and we can get us a good lease in the fairway and drill us a well, the two of us. Yes, by God, we'll drill us an oil well out yonder. The soldiers are gone now and it's proration out there, but the hell with that. They're running it just the same. Proration, hell! They're running hot oil like a river. That's where we'll go, and, by God, they won't keep me down. They just can't do it. . . . But, still, I had it in mind to buy me a farm, or a

ranch. A place on the river where it's quiet and just a few crops. I was thinking that and she said that's what she wanted, too. But, hell, farming ain't for me. It's a fine thing to watch your cotton grow and watch your cattle get fat and live in a big house on the river, but that ain't for me. Farming ain't for me. Out in East Texas they got an oil field better than fifty miles long, the biggest there ever was. We'll just get us a lease in the fairway and drill us an oil well, and that's what I'll tell her. You and me together, I'll say. I ain't a farmer, I'll say. Hell, I'm an oil man!

The long shape of the yellow bonnet slid silently beside him, and Joe Simmons smiled at Cobb from behind the wheel. Cobb touched Joe's shoulder lightly as he got in the car. There was the crisp dryness of the shirt and the warmth of the shoulder beneath and he had returned to a world where small things were not a refuge but were part of a whole, and the chain was no longer broken. Cobb slapped Joe's shoulder hard and put the car in gear.

THE END

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